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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

History in George Eliot and René Girard

by

Richard Alan Gooding

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF Master of Arts

Department of English

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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Literary interpretation must be systematic because it is the continuation of literature. It should formalize implicit or already half-explicit systems. To maintain that criticism will never be systematic is to maintain that it will never be real knowledge. The value of critical thought depends not on how cleverly it manages to disguise its own systematic nature or on how many fundamental issues it manages to shirk or to dissolve but on how much literary substance it really embraces, comprehends, and makes articulate.

René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.

George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life"

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled History in George Eliot and René Girard submitted by Richard Alan Gooding in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Supervisor

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Date 22 August 1986

Abstract

This study treats *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and two of George Eliot's last novels—*Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*—as tools of mutual criticism. Its purpose is two-fold. First, it uses Girard's theory of imitative desire as a means of evaluating Eliot's late fiction. The extent to which Eliot has understood the imitative nature of desire can account for much of what stands out as particularly good in her last novels—an art which is preoccupied with educating the reader in the nature and often destructive consequences of egoism, yet still succeeds in extending his sympathies to a Casaubon or a Mrs. Transome. By the same argument, the points at which Eliot's understanding of mimetic desire fails can account for the striking, even embarrassing, weaknesses which persist in her art until the end of her career—the idealization of some characters, which F.R. Leavis has attributed to "an immaturity that George Eliot never leaves safely behind her" (Leavis 56), and the vilification of others, about which Leavis and most other critics remain silent. Secondly, this study contends that another of the great strengths of Eliot's late novels—the insistence on the importance of *culture* as a means of ensuring both social stability and the improvement of the individual—suggests modifications to Girard's statements about history and his description of what he calls *novelistic* literature.

The first chapter after the Introduction provides a brief summary of Girard's theory of imitative desire and its historical implications, followed by an examination of the concept of culture which Eliot formulates in two essays, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) and Felix Holt's "Address to Working Men" (1867). The following two chapters concern themselves specifically with Eliot's understanding of imitative desire and her formulation of culture in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*.

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I. Introduction

The book which lays the foundations of René Girard's critical approach, *Mensonge romantique et Vérité romanesque*, was first published in France in 1961. Four years later it appeared in English translation, with some minor additions, under the title *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. In this work Girard argues that almost all desires are imitative; that is, one desires only the objects which are designated by a model. Though the theory of imitative—or *mimetic*—desire concerns itself primarily with psychological phenomena, it has particularly strong implications for an historical approach to the novel. While Girard claims that mimetic desire may be found in all cultures and in all historical periods, he argues that the decline of Christianity and the decay of hierarchical social orders, both of which have characterized western civilization since the Renaissance, have permitted mimetic desire to manifest itself in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways. In fact, it is crucial to Girard's argument that the five European novelists he considers—Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevski—constitute a chain by which one can trace western man's progressive enslavement to the imitative nature of his own desires. But despite the ability of Girard's system to provide a coherent argument which explains such a large amount of literary material, one aspect in particular—this historical aspect—demands to be brought under scrutiny, since it rests almost entirely upon Girard's assertion that none of the humanisms of western civilization has offered any safeguard against the progression of imitative desire.

This study treats *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and two of George Eliot's last novels—*Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*—as tools of mutual criticism. Its purpose will be two-fold. First, it uses Girard's theory of imitative desire as a means of evaluating Eliot's late fiction. The extent to which Eliot has understood the mimetic nature of desire can account for much of what stands out as particularly good in her last novels—an art which is preoccupied with educating the reader in the nature and often destructive consequences of egoism, yet still succeeds in extending his sympathies to a Casaubon or a Mrs. Transome. By the same argument, the points at which Eliot's understanding of mimetic desire fails can account for the

striking, even embarrassing, weaknesses which persist in her art until the end of her career—the idealization of some characters, which F.R. Leavis has attributed to "an immaturity that George Eliot never leaves safely behind her" (Leavis 56), and the vilification of others, about which Leavis and most other critics remain silent. Secondly, this study contends that another of the great strengths of Eliot's late novels—the insistence on the importance of *culture* as a means of ensuring both social stability and the improvement of the individual—suggests modifications to Girard's statements about history and his description of what he calls *novelistic* literature. By way of preparation for this mutual criticism, I propose, in the next chapter, to outline Girard's theory of imitative desire and its historical implications, and then to examine the concept of culture which Eliot formulates in two essays, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) and Felix Holt's "Address to Working Men" (1867); the following two chapters will concern themselves specifically with Eliot's understanding of imitative desire and her formulation of culture in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*.

Ever since Leavis' influential study of Eliot's work in *The Great Tradition*, the almost universally recognized triumph of *Felix Holt* has been Eliot's treatment of Mrs. Transome, Harold, and Jermyn. The most common criticisms have been that the complicated revelations necessary to reveal Esther as the legitimate heir to the Transome estate have made the plot over-complex, and that Eliot idealizes Felix Holt and sentimentalizes his courtship of Esther. To these Raymond Williams has added the serious (and influential) accusation that on the political level the novel shies away from a serious treatment of the democratizing forces of society and lapses into political quietism.[1] Girard's approach cannot offer much insight into the failure of the novel's plot, which has simply to do with the imperfect matching of form to content. It can, however, do much to explain the well-recognized strength of Eliot's treatment

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[1]Take, for instance, Williams' comment that Eliot's "observation and conclusion surrender, virtually without a fight, to the general structure of feeling about these matters which was the common property of her generation" (Williams 119). This line of argument is taken up by Arnold Kettle in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*. Kettle argues that *Felix Holt* is representative of "the tendency of the writers of the 1860s...to look at life more and more from the point of view of the modern middle-class intellectual with his own peculiar mixture of high-mindedness and blindness" (Kettle 114).

of the Transome plot, and to place it in the wider political context of the novel. Moreover, a consideration of imitative desire can illuminate the charge of idealism and sentimentality. Finally, it must be said that in *Felix Holt* Eliot's simple formulation of culture—the importance of adherence to individual and class duties—offers a significant alternative to imitative desire in an increasingly democratic society.

Leavis' essay cites Eliot's treatment of Bulstrode, Casaubon, and the marriage between Lydgate and Rosamond as the particular strengths of *Middlemarch*, and the treatment of Dorothea and Will Ladislaw as an instance of Eliot's tendency to idealize the heroines with whom she is tempted to identify. A discussion of imitative desire can help affirm and in one important respect (the valuation of the treatment of Rosamond Lydgate) qualify Leavis' remarks about the novel. The great strengths of *Middlemarch* can be attributed to Eliot's understanding of the effects of imitative desire on her characters, particularly Casaubon, Bulstrode, and Lydgate. Likewise, Eliot's tendency to surrender to the imitative nature of her own desires can account not only for her idealization of Dorothea and Ladislaw but also for her tendency to withdraw her sympathy and the reader's from Rosamond Lydgate. Finally, it may be said that in *Middlemarch* Eliot elaborates on her definition of culture, transforming it from the comparatively simple moral imperative of *Felix Holt* into a more complex means not only of safeguarding the social order but of educating one's responses to such aspects of life as the sensuous and beautiful.

II. Desire, History, and Culture

According to Girard's critical approach, as it was formulated in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, all desire above the purely physiological level is mimetic. Most novelists insist that choice is spontaneous, and that the origin of desire is rooted in the desired object or, less commonly, in the impassioned subject. What distinguishes the great writers from their contemporaries is their ability to draw the reader's attention to man's tendency to surrender his powers of judgment to models—or, to use Girard's word, *mediators*—who seem in some way admirable. To illustrate the mechanism of imitative desire Girard uses the metaphor of a triangle whose corners are occupied by the desiring subject, the mediator, and the desired object. The admired mediator confers prestige upon the objects he desires (or seems to desire); the desiring subject, in turn, imitates the desires of the mediator in the hope that the acquisition of the desirable object will make him more like the mediator. Girard argues that this mechanism of desire is at work when Don Quixote surrenders his powers of judgment to Amadis of Gaul, a figure from chivalric romance, and when Emma Bovary imitates the romantic heroines she has read about in the convent. Both characters copy their models in the hope that their imitation will make them somehow better than themselves. The great writer, a Cervantes or a Flaubert, draws the reader's attention to the real origin of desire, the mediator, and places the desired object in a position of secondary importance, where it functions as a clue to the mediator's presence. Thus, if the critic is to understand the great writer, he must become aware of the imitative nature of desire and learn to see the mediator who is often hidden behind the objects of desire.

As early as *Adam Bede* George Eliot's art begins to concern itself with the imitative nature of desire. In the chapter "The Two Bed-Chambers," Hetty Sorrel, who has already received some attentions from young Captain Donnithorne, sits before an old mirror and a makeshift dressing-table, consciously imitating an aristocratic ideal she only vaguely understands. We soon notice that Hetty's clothes, jewelry, and surroundings all shabbily mimic the Donnithornes' genteel luxury. The mirror, we learn, was bought by the Poysers at a "sale of genteel household furniture" and, though tarnished, is distinguished by two "brass candle

socket[s]" which give it "an aristocratic air" (*AB* 194). Moreover, the scene is lit by the most affordable trappings of gentility, "two short bits of wax candle—secretly bought at Treddleston" (*AB* 195):

> [S]he could only get one good view of her head and neck, and that was to be had only by sitting down on a low chair before her dressing-table. And the dressing-table was no dressing-table at all, but a small old chest of drawers, the most awkward thing in the world to sit down before, for the big brass handles quite hurt her knees, and she couldn't get near the glass at all comfortably. But devout worshippers never allow inconveniences to prevent them from performing their religious rites, and Hetty this evening was more bent on her peculiar form of worship than usual. (*AB* 194-95)

This episode is, of course, comic. The incongruity between the cramped quarters and Hetty's feelings of social sophistication satirizes the young woman's imitation, devalues her desire, and strengthens the reader's as yet only partly developed scepticism. But Hetty's mimicked gentility is worth serious consideration, and as it becomes more explicit it provides one of the novel's central insights into Hetty's character:

> She was going to let down her hair, and make herself look like that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room. It was soon done, and the dark hyacinthine curves fell on her neck. It was not heavy, massive, merely rippling hair, but soft and silken, running at every opportunity into delicate rings. But she pushed it all backward, to look like the picture, and form a dark curtain, throwing into relief her round white neck. Then she put down her brush and comb, and looked at herself, folding her arms before her, still like the picture. (*AB* 195)

As the presence of Hetty's models becomes more and more striking, the objects of desire lose much of their importance. Hetty's imitated gentility does not merely reflect her fantasy of marrying Arthur Donnithorne or acquiring an aristocrat's immense wealth. Such desires are evident in her thoughts of marriage and finery, but even Captain Donnithorne and the fashionable clothes, like the costume jewelry and provisional dressing-table, fade into the background and remain important to Hetty only because of the prestige they symbolize. That Hetty does not desire Arthur Donnithorne for his own sake becomes clear once one notices that, while she virtually ignores the prospects of private life after marriage, she ruminates on the way her public appearance would affect others. Clearly, what is most important to Hetty is that her soon-to-be-acquired prestige distinguishes her from her neighbors. "Captain Donnithorne," she fantasizes, "is very close to her, putting his arm round her, perhaps kissing

her, and everybody else is admiring and envying her—especially Mary Burge..." (*AB* 199). The relevance of Girard's description of mimetic desire is obvious. Like Emma Bovary, Hetty does not simply long to acquire luxuries; rather, she seeks to rise to supremacy in her own eyes and in the eyes of others by acquiring the prestige which she perceives in her aristocratic models.

The desiring subject's attitude towards his mediator is determined by a "*distance* between the mediator and the subject" which is "primarily spiritual" (Girard 9). As long as Hetty views her mediators across an immense social gulf, she can see in them a prestige to which she can safely and openly aspire by imitating their desires. Before Arthur Donnithorne's attentions become assiduous, Hetty cannot seriously entertain the idea that she is *competing* with the ladies above her rank. Therefore, her attitude towards her mediators is characterized by an admiration which she herself recognizes, even if she finds she must conceal it from her family. Girard calls imitation of this kind *external mediation*. Not all mimicry, however, is as friendly as Hetty's imitation of the aristocratic ladies. When the distance between subject and mediator decreases to the point where they inhabit the same world of possibilities—that is, where the possibility for rivalry arises—*external mediation* gives way to *internal mediation* (Girard 9). Here the desiring subject imitates a mediator who desires, or perhaps already possesses, an object over which competition may arise. The mediator designates desirable objects, but then begins to thwart the desiring subject's attempts at appropriation by threatening to acquire them for himself. Surprisingly, the result is that the mediator's influence over the subject becomes increasingly pronounced. Girard writes,

> the disciple inevitably sees, in the mechanical obstacle which [the mediator] puts in his way, proof of the ill will borne him. Far from declaring himself a faithful vassal, he thinks only of repudiating the bonds of mediation. But these bonds are stronger than ever, for the mediator's apparent hostility does not diminish his prestige but instead augments it. The subject is convinced that the model considers himself too superior to accept him as a disciple. (Girard 10)

Evidently, in such a situation the desiring subject does not experience a sense of regard for his mediators, but rather, what Girard, citing Stendhal, calls "the *modern* emotions...'envy, jealousy, and impotent hatred'" (Girard 14). These "modern emotions" all reflect the impassioned subject's ambivalence towards his model: as he falls under the power of internal

mediation, he feels increasingly divided between contradictory feelings of admiration, which initially attracted him to his mediator, and malice, which the mediator's role as obstacle engenders. Now a reversal is effected in the impassioned subject's mind, and the mediator's "secondary role [as obstacle]...becomes primary, concealing his original function of a model scrupulously imitated" (Girard 11). In this way, the victim of internal mediation convinces himself that his desires are spontaneous and that his rival is the unwelcome new-comer.

Despite the impassioned subject's natural inclination to conceal his imitation behind genuinely felt hostility, internal mediation can generally be inferred from his fascination with the rival. Though the most obvious of Hetty Sorrel's desires are determined by distant and genteel models, a woman only a little above Hetty's social position proves a source of internal mediation. In fact, Mary Burge's only importance in the novel is as a potential rival for Adam's affections. As Hetty's mediator, Mary determines the varying intensity of Hetty's desire for the young labourer. Because Adam is not a gentleman (at least, not in the social sense of the word), he is of little interest to Hetty. However, when Hetty thinks of Mr. Burge's plan to have his daughter marry Adam, one immediately detects the possibility that Adam may eventually become desirable to Hetty:

> [Hetty] liked to feel that this strong, skilful, keen-eyed man was in her power, and would have been indignant if he had shown the least sign of slipping from under the yoke of her coquettish tyranny, and attaching himself to the gentle Mary Burge, who would have been grateful enough for the most trifling notice from him: 'Mary Burge, indeed! such a sallow-faced girl: if she put on a bit of pink ribbon, she looked as yellow as a crow-flower, and her hair was as straight as a hank of cotton.' (*AB* 142)

As long as Hetty is confident of her mastery over Adam, she feels no desire for the young labourer. However, once she suspects that Mary Burge is a serious contender for Adam's affections, her desire increases. One day, when Adam and Hetty go for a walk, we learn, "It was nothing to her—putting her arm through Adam's.... Her heart beat no faster, and she looked at the half-bare hedgerows and the ploughed field with the same sense of oppressive dulness as before" (*AB* 403-404). But moments later, Adam's unexpected remark that he will take a share in Mr. Burge's business makes Hetty conclude that he has become engaged to Mary. The result is a sudden reversal of Hetty's feelings:

> [Hetty] had so often heard it hinted by her uncle that Adam might have Mary Burge and a share of the business any day if he liked, that she associated the two objects now, and the thought immediately occurred that perhaps Adam had given her up because of what had happened lately, and had turned towards Mary Burge.... Hetty thought he was going to marry Mary Burge—she didn't like him to marry—perhaps she didn't like him to marry any one but herself? (*AB* 404)

Since Hetty does not understand that it is Mary Burge who is the origin of her affection for Adam, she sees her young rival as an insolent trespasser who poaches in the borderlands of desire. In "The Two Bed-Chambers" Hetty's resentment of Mary becomes more and more apparent as she looks forward to an eventual triumph over her rival. In her fantasy of genteel life, she thinks, "Mary Burge and everyone would see her going out in her carriage" (*AB* 197). A little later she thinks, "everybody else is admiring and envying her—especially Mary Burge" (*AB* 199). It stands to reason that Hetty would feel little need of impressing those whom she sees as truly inferior. Though she denies any admiration for Mary, admiration, conscious or unconscious, must be inferred from her evident wish to impress and ultimately triumph over the "sallow-faced girl." In fact, Mary's prestige is strong enough that, next to the Donnithornes, she seems the most important influence on Hetty's desires. She unwittingly ensures that Hetty feels an ambivalence for Adam which the young labourer finds so baffling. Hetty's susceptibility to imitative desire leaves her unwilling, because of her enslavement to her internal mediator, to relinquish her claim to Adam, yet equally unwilling, because of her allegiance to her external mediators, to accept him as a suitor.

In both internal and external mediation the mediator's glance transfigures the world, conferring upon the objects of desire an illusory prestige and rendering undesired objects worthless, regardless of their real value. Under the influence of an aristocratic ideal wax candles, costume jewelry, and makeshift dressing-tables become the signs of gentility in exile, and Arthur Donnithorne is transformed into an "Olympian God" (*AB* 145). Adam, moreover, is undervalued, except when the rival's influence is felt. Though Girard's study is most concerned with the effect of mediation on the objects of desire, it must be noted that imitative desire also distorts the mediator, particularly in the case of internal mediation. As the distance

between subject and mediator diminishes and external mediation gives way to internal mediation, the mediator, while retaining his status as something of a deity whose prestige makes him worth imitating, is by degrees degraded into something diabolical. Though Hetty's feelings of rivalry with Mary Burge are not extremely strong, it is not difficult to see how Hetty's resentment transforms Mary. We ought to be a little suspicious of Hetty's gloating reflection that Mary's "new print dress looks very contemptible by the side of Hetty's resplendent toilette" (*AB* 199) and of Hetty's indignant opinion that Mary Burge is "such a sallow-faced girl...as yellow as a crow-flower, and her hair [is] as straight as a hank of cotton" (*AB* 143).

When one considers the effects of mediated desire on the literary imagination, the critical strengths of Girard's system become clear. As the original title of Girard's study suggests, the fundamental descriptive and evaluative distinction to be made is between literature which is *romantic* ("romantique" in the original French), and that which is *novelistic* ("romanesque"). Romantic works, Girard argues, "reflect the presence of a mediator without ever revealing it," while novelistic works "reveal this presence" (Girard 17).[2] The task of the novelistic work is, therefore, to reveal the nature and effects of imitative desire. In *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye seizes upon a similar distinction by which he aptly describes, in familiar terms, the romantic distortion which Girard attributes to the influence of the mediator. Frye writes, "It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine and villain respectively. That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjectivity that the novel lacks..." (Frye 304).[3] For Girard, misapprehension of the mechanism of desire becomes the most important obstacle facing the nineteenth-century novelists. Most writers of this time, he argues, repudiate imitation and "spontaneity

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[2]As Yvonne Freccero points out in a footnote to the English translation of Girard's book, the distinction between the terms *romantic* and *novelistic*, as Girard uses them, has to do only with whether the works reveal or conceal the imitative nature of desire, not with considerations of genre (Girard 16-17).

[3] What seems most interesting here is that although the use of Jungian terms aptly describes the manifestations of romanticism, Frye, like the romantic writers he describes, seems unaware of the significance of this "glow of subjectivity" and consequently tends to celebrate it.

becomes...dogma" (Girard 15). Such a "dogma" attests not only to an ignorance of the imitative nature of desire, but also to an enslavement to internal mediation. The novelistic writers of the nineteenth century recognize the fallacy of this dogma, discover the forms that imitative desire takes in their own time, and set out to understand even their own mediators. The romantic writers steadfastly continue to deny any admiration for their models, but continue their unwitting imitation in much the same way that Hetty Sorrel denies her admiration for Mary Burge, all the while allowing her rival to dictate her desires. Since the romantic writers never recognize their own mediators, it is from them that one repeatedly hears the "lie of spontaneous desire":

> The romantic *vaniteux* always wants to convince himself that his desire is written into the nature of things, or, which amounts to the same thing, that it is the emanation of a serene subjectivity, the creation *ex nihilo* of a quasi- divine ego. Desire is no longer rooted in the object perhaps, but it is rooted in the subject; it is certainly not rooted in the Other. The objective and subjective fallacies are one and the same; both originate in the image which we all have of our own desires. Subjectivisms and objectivisms, romanticisms and realisms, individualisms and scientisms, idealisms and positivisms appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator. All these dogmas are the aesthetic or philosophic translation of world views peculiar to internal mediation. They all depend directly or indirectly on the lie of spontaneous desire. They all defend the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted. (Girard 15-16)

To defend the "illusion of autonomy" is to submit oneself unknowingly to the authority of one's models and to celebrate the transfiguration which desire imposes on one's mediators and the objects they desire. To confront one's mediators, on the other hand, is to demystify desire. It is to discover that the objects of desire may have only an illusory value, and that one's mediators possess neither god-like nor diabolic qualities. Though the former endeavour is the mandate of romantic literature and the latter the mandate of novelistic literature, the two terms are not completely exclusive. Even in the greatest novelistic works—and George Eliot's are no exception—there may remain places where the novelist has not completely understood the mediator and falls prey to mimetic desire.

Hetty Sorrel is a character whom Eliot understands well enough to reveal the mechanism of imitative desire. Eliot's treatment of her is novelistic because it reveals the imitative nature of her desire, the illusory value of the objects of desire, and the real nature of

the mediator. Eliot maintains a critical—one might even say disinterested—distance which enables her to reveal the truth about Hetty's desire. Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss*, however, is too much Eliot's stand-in for any such critical distance to be consistently maintained. Consequently, though Eliot's treatment of Maggie starts out novelistically, it eventually slips into romanticism. Early in the novel, Eliot portrays Maggie Tulliver as a girl whose "need of being loved" (*MF* 89) forces her to search out models, like her brother, whom she imitates for their approval. In "A Voice from the Past," Eliot portrays Maggie as a young woman who has outgrown her childhood mediators and is, once again, in search of a model who can provide her life with order and meaning:

> And now—without the indirect charm of school emulation—Télémaque was mere bran; so were the hard dry questions on Christian doctrine: there was no flavour in them, no strength. Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies: if she could have had all Scott's novels and all Byron's poems!—then perhaps she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life. And yet...they were hardly what she wanted. (*MF* 379)

As she rummages through Tom's old school books, Maggie discovers Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, in which the author exhorts the Christian reader to seek salvation through the imitation of Christ's life. Maggie immediately begins a life of pious asceticism, in which almost all her decisions are made according to her understanding of Christ's existence:

> She read so eagerly and constantly in her three books, the Bible, Thomas-à-Kempis, and the 'Christian Year' (no longer rejected as a 'hymn-book') that they filled her mind with a continual stream of rhythmic memories; and she was too ardently learning to see all nature and life in the light of her new faith to need any other material for her mind to work on.... (*MF* 387)

Though Maggie's imitation of Christ is worlds away from Hetty's imitation of an aristocratic ideal, there are clearly similarities between the two which necessitate their being included together under the description of external mediation. However, in the case of Maggie Tulliver Eliot does not fully distance herself from her young heroine. The result, as Leavis aptly remarks, is that "in George Eliot's presentation of Maggie there is an element of self-idealization...with the self-idealization there goes an element of self-pity" (Leavis 56). The George Eliot who created Maggie Tulliver identifies herself too strongly with her immature heroine and too earnestly seeks self-justification to avoid feeling the influence of her own

mediators. It is as if Eliot had taken Hetty Sorrel's place at the Poysers' dressing-table and saw— instead of "that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room" (*AB* 195)—the idealized image of the kind of woman she herself would like to be, the image of Maggie Tulliver. Indeed, Eliot does show a marked tendency to canonize Maggie Tulliver, a tendency which grows especially strong towards the end of the novel. Take, for instance, the following passage from "The Last Conflict," in which Tom and Maggie are reconciled and—perhaps more importantly—Maggie is justified and Tom humbled:

> They sat mutely gazing at each other: Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face—Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent: and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort. (*MF* 654)

Maggie's ability to inspire awe, her complete triumph over Tom's pride, and the wholly earnest description of her action as an "almost miraculous divinely-protected effort" all attest to the romantic transfiguration of Eliot's heroine. The romantic aspect of *The Mill on the Floss* is also strongly felt in the idealized presentation of Stephen Guest, who is deified in Maggie's and Eliot's mind in pretty much the same way as Arthur Donnithorne is deified in Hetty Sorrel's. In many of the descriptions of Stephen Guest there is a sense that Eliot "shares to the full [Maggie's] sense of Stephen's irresistibleness" (Leavis 56):

> [H]e was looking at her—and does not a supreme poet blend light and sound into one, calling darkness mute, and light eloquent? Something strangely powerful there was in the light of Stephen's long gaze, for it made Maggie's face turn towards it and look upward at it—slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness. And they walked unsteadily on, without feeling that they were walking—without feeling anything but that long grave mutual gaze which has the solemnity belonging to all deep human passion. (*MF* 560-61)

By the end of the novel, the romantic qualities of Eliot's art—the idealization of Stephen Guest and the author's self-idealization—have seriously damaged the psychological realism for which Eliot, at her best, has been justly praised.

The usefulness of the theory of imitative desire does not lie only in its account of the differences between novelistic and romantic literature, but in its providing an analysis of the processes which generate these differences. It does not constitute an assemblage of arbitrary literary conventions; rather, it suggests an origin that explains and provides the means for

evaluating the phenomena which Northrop Frye (among others) describes. To the victim of imitative desire the "object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire aimed at is the mediator's *being*" (Girard 53). For Girard, at least in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, imitative desire is a kind of metaphysical illness. The root cause of imitative desire is a strong sense of one's own insufficiency. Girard writes, "The wish to be absorbed into the substance of the Other implies an insuperable revulsion for one's own substance.... All heroes of novels hate themselves on a more essential level than that of 'qualities'" (Girard 54-55). He gives credence to Dostoyevski's belief that the victims of mimetic desire have put their faith in a "false promise...of metaphysical autonomy":

> For two or three centuries this has been the underlying principle of every "new" Western doctrine: God is dead, man must take his place. Pride has always been a temptation but in modern times it has become irresistible because it is organized and amplified in an unheard-of way.... As the voice of pride swells, the consciousness of existence becomes more bitter and solitary. (Girard 56-57)

Confronted by his own solitude, yet unable to universalize his experience, the hero imitates others, whom he mistakenly takes to be self-sufficient, in the hope that he will assimilate their being and become self-sufficient himself. But the hero's hatred of himself extends to all that he possesses; consequently, possession never satisfies desire, and when an object is acquired it becomes worthless, and a new object or a new mediator must be found. (Hetty Sorrel, it will be remembered, can desire Adam Bede only when she thinks he belongs to another.) Thus, the rejection of God in favour of any of the various doctrines which deify the self "does not eliminate transcendency, but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deçà*. The imitation of Christ [*vertical transcendency* in Girard's terminology] becomes the imitation of one's neighbor [*deviated transcendency*]" (Girard 59). Choice in the novel is thus always between the imitation of God and the imitation of one's fellows. Indeed, Girard argues, "The opposition and analogies between the two transcendencies are found in all novelists of imitative desire, Christian and non-Christian alike" (Girard 62). Evidence of this comparison abounds in Eliot's early novels. One need only think of *Adam Bede*'s chapter "The Two Bed- Chambers," in which Hetty's ersatz religion is compared so unfavorably with Dinah's Methodism, or the

The Mill on the Floss's chapter "A Voice from the Past," in which the romances which comprised Maggie's school-reading are compared with Thomas-à-Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*.

It is clear that Girard's insistence on the necessity of a choice between human and divine models implies a kind of fundamentalism, a fundamentalism which is suggested by the epigram to the original French edition of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*: "L'homme possède ou un Dieu ou une idole." For Girard, and one assumes for Scheler (the author of the epigram), one must choose *either* vertical *or* deviated transcendency: there is no third choice. Romantic literature must unwittingly continue to endorse deviated transcendency, while novelistic literature denounces deviated transcendency and implicitly or explicitly embraces the Christian alternative. Though he recognizes Stendhal's attempt at formulating a humanism which could serve as an alternative to mediated desire, he argues that it "has hardly any repercussions on the business of writing novels" (Girard 65). Indeed, he seems to take the eventual failure of Stendhal's experiment as evidence for the failure of all such endeavours. In a 1978 interview Girard discusses the desirability and the difficulty of creating a "society that will be open, that will not collapse in mimetic hysteria" (Interview 38), and again suggests a necessary connexion between Christianity and the abandonment of destructive imitation:

> The various types of "closure" within which we all function are inseparable from the expulsions and persecutions we still unconsciously practice, and the effort to rid ourselves of arbitrary differentiations is one with our ethical, political, and religious effort as inheritors of the Biblical tradition: we must get rid of "discrimination" in all its forms insofar as it destroys the good reciprocity we want to establish among all men. (Interview 37)

As the interviewer, Bruce Bassoff, later points out in his book *The Secret Sharers*, "René Girard is...sanguine...about our ability to live without the Law—the demands and interdictions of previous cultures—but his hope seems to be guaranteed by his belief in the divinity of Christ" (Bassoff 9). For Bassoff, who does not share Girard's sanguinity, a question poses itself, somewhat importunately: "if faith is lacking, what can one do to protect oneself against the competing immediacies of everyday life?" (Bassoff 9) The question is, of course, both valid and important, and it suggests at least the possibility of formulating non-Christian alternatives

to imitative desire and of escaping from what Girard sees as the fundamental choice between divine and human mediators.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* the implications of Girardian fundamentalism present themselves most clearly in the final chapter. Here Girard argues that the conclusion of the novelistic work always entails a conversion in which the hero recognizes and renounces his pride and, along with that, metaphysical desire:

> Repudiation of the mediator implies renunciation of divinity, and this means renouncing pride.... In renouncing divinity the hero renounces slavery. Every level of his existence is inverted, all the effects of metaphysical desire are replaced by contrary effects. Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendency to vertical transcendency.
>
> This time it is not a false but a genuine conversion. The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources; for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look which he has dreaded, which is the death of pride, is his salvation. (Girard 294)

When the novelistic revelation occurs, Christian symbolism is inevitably used because "it alone is able to give form to the experience of the novel" (Girard 310). Stendhal, Girard remarks, may seem apologetic about Julien Sorel's religious meditations at the end of *The Red and the Black*, but "we can no longer be put off the scent" (Girard 293)—despite Stendhal's attempt to avoid offering an explicitly Christian resolution, his novel endorses the vertical transcendency which is essentially Christian. One's sense of the fundamentalism of Girard's system is, then, strengthened by the recognition that, if only Christian symbolism can articulate novelistic revelation, novelistic revelation must be essentially Christian.

Girard's view of history is very closely tied to his fundamentalism. He argues that since the Renaissance western society has been undergoing a historical development that has led to the triumph of internal mediation in modern times. In a later work, *Violence and the Sacred*, he makes explicit the view that underlies the concept of history in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. He writes, "Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another's throats" (*Violence and the Sacred* 49). Writing of Stendhal in his earlier work, he remarks,

> If the *modern* emotions [jealousy, rivalry, and hatred] flourish, it is not because "envious natures" and "jealous temperaments" have unfortunately and mysteriously increased in number, but because *internal* mediation triumphs in a universe where the differences between men are gradually erased. (Girard 14)

The necessary condition for the modern loss of 'difference' is the displacement of Christianity by the various humanisms (all characterized by the belief in the perfectibility of man and the tendency to ignore or deny the need for transcendency) which have become ever more influential since the Renaissance. In his discussion of Dostoyevski, Girard argues that "the underlying principle of every 'new' Western doctrine" has been that "God is dead, man must take his place" (Girard 56). Since man has rejected the transcendency which Christianity provides—without in any way overcoming his need for transcendency—the rise of the modern humanisms results in a movement from vertical to deviated transcendency. But it is the progressive democratization of western society that has aggravated metaphysical desire and ensured the comparatively recent triumph of internal over external mediation. The decay of hierarchical social orders can best account for the shift in emphasis from external mediation in ***Don Quixote*** to internal mediation in the novels of Dostoyevski. In fact, the five novelists Girard studies—Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevski—reveal the links in the chain which leads to modern man's enslavement by internal mediation. Though Cervantes does reveal the nature of internal mediation, his novelistic work, ***Don Quixote***, is primarily concerned with a hero dominated by external mediation. Flaubert, though historically more recent than Stendhal, concerns himself with the "invasion of virgin territory" by metaphysical desire (Girard 149); Madame Bovary, like Don Quixote, is a victim of external mediation. Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoyevski all attest to the relentless progress of mediated desire that attends the loss of differences between men as hierachical social structures are levelled. In Stendhal's work, Girard argues, internal mediation invades the public and political spheres of life; in Proust's, the private spheres; and finally, in Dostoyevski's, the family itself (Girard 42). Dostoyevski, though historically Proust's predecessor, occupies the last rung of man's descent into the underworld of internal mediation because "Russian forms of experience were in

advance of those in the West. Russia had passed, without any transitional period, from traditional and feudal structures to the most *modern* society" (Girard 44). Girard offers his clearest formulation of the relationship between democratic social structures and the progression of internal mediation in his discussion of Stendhal. He writes:

> The revolution destroys only one thing—but that one thing is the most important of all though it seems trivial to barren minds—the divine right of kings.... The courtier's external mediation is replaced by a system of internal mediation.... The revolutionaries thought they would be destroying vanity[4] when they destroyed the privileges of the noble. But vanity is like a virulent cancer that spreads in a more serious form throughout the body just when one thinks it has been removed. Who is there left to imitate after the "tyrant"? Henceforth men shall copy each other; idolatry of one person is replaced by hatred of a hundred thousand rivals.... ***Men will become gods for each other***. (Girard 119)

Since even in the historical component of Girard's theory the rise of metaphysical desire can be traced to the decline of Christianity, the theory must be seen as at least implicitly dependent on a form of Christianity, even if the peculiar nature of the progression of imitative desire has been determined by the abolition of the social and spiritual differences that have historically separated men.

The assumptions and the reasoning which account for Girard's fundamentalist tendencies are evident. Since none of the western humanisms has offered anything to thwart the progression of imitative desire, the problems which began with the decline of Christianity and were precipitated by the irreversible trend towards democratic social structures can be remedied only by the lessons of Christianity. Girard virtually ignores the possibility of alternative influences which might counteract the progression of internal mediation. Perhaps the great English novel which most closely agrees with Girard's Christian definition of novelistic literature is *Clarissa*. Here Richardson's heroine, Clarissa Harlowe, like the other characters in the novel, suffers from the feelings of resentment which are typical of internal mediation; she alone, however, sees the importance of overcoming imitative desire, and before she dies she renounces the world of public opinion and undergoes a religious conversion by which she

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[4] Girard, like Stendhal, uses the word "vanity" to denote internal mediation: "Stendhal uses the word 'vanity' (*vanité*) to indicate...forms of 'copying' and 'imitating'"(Girard, 6).

almost vanishes from the universe of human activity. [5] This pattern, however, is not very common among the English novels that deal with imitative desire. Obviously, if any attempt to formulate a humanism to counteract 'vanity' proved more successful than Stendhal's, Girard's definition of novelistic literature and, in particular, his comments on the nature of novelistic revelation would have to be substantially modified.

Of course, throughout the nineteenth century various English intellectuals responded to historically new problems, among which was the potential for chaos which attended the decay of hierarchical social structures. And, of course, not all of these responses either deal with imitative desire or remind one of the fundamentalism which is so much a part of Girard's solution. In his book *Culture and Society 1780-1950* Raymond Williams argues that the nineteenth-century concern with the problems of industrialization and democracy led to

> the emergence of *culture* as an abstraction and an absolute: an emergence which, in a very complex way, merges two general responses—first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative. (Williams 17)

Like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot recognized this "practical separation" and suggested corrective measures which were characteristically humanistic rather than Christian. Apart from her novels, Eliot wrote two essays which represent significant attempts at defining a concept of culture which might act as the "court of human appeal" to which Williams refers. Together these essays, "The Natural History of German Life," which was published in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, and the "Address to Working Men," which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* shortly after the publication of *Felix Holt* and the passage of the Second Reform Bill, constitute Eliot's most direct formulation of the idea of culture. Not surprisingly, these essays have little to do with desire, yet they have an important bearing on a discussion of Girard's theory since it is the idea of culture that provides an alternative to imitative desire in

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[5] See, for instance, James H. Maddox, Jr.'s Girardian reading of *Clarissa*. Though Maddox argues that Clarissa does not, in her last acts, succeed in overcoming her resentment, he points out that she attempts to escape imitative desire by reestablishing the essentially Christian "system of exemplars" which is overturned at the beginning of the novel (Maddox 288).

Eliot's last three novels.

"The Natural History of German Life," Eliot's study of the German political philosopher Wilhelm von Riehl, concerns itself principally with the necessary conditions for a responsible social policy. For Eliot, who summarizes and assents to all important aspects of Riehl's argument, it seems "wise to pause a little from theorizing, and see what is the material actually present to work upon" (*Essays* 289). The article provides both a criticism of rigid theoretical systems, which in Eliot's mind invariably lead to destructive social legislation, and an argument for the necessity of respecting actual social conditions. The conclusion Riehl and Eliot both reach is that "a wise social policy must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the Natural History of social bodies" (*Essays* 290). Perhaps the most striking aspect of Eliot's article is the importance which it places on the historical inheritance—or "Natural History"—of society:

> [Riehl] sees in European society *incarnate history*, and any attempt to disengage it from its historical elements must, he believes, be simply destructive of social vitality. What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. (*Essays* 287)

In England, however, the forces of social change have been profoundly disruptive of the nation's links with its past. In the first place, Eliot contends that years of social abrasion have done much to uproot the English peasantry from its own traditions; in fact, she argues that in terms of "mental culture" the German peasant in 1850 more closely resembles his turn-of-the-century English counterpart than a contemporary English peasant, whose "mental culture [is] often equal to that of the professional class in provincial towns" (*Essays* 273). Moreover, as a people the English are in much greater danger of losing their sense of tradition than their continental neighbors:

> This vital connexion with the past is much more vividly felt on the Continent than in England, where we have to recall it by an effort of memory and reflection; for though our English life is in its core intensely traditional, Protestantism and commerce have modernized the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country.... (*Essays* 288)

It is this evident belief in the importance of preserving a sense of society as "incarnate history" that constitutes the central idea of Eliot's essay. According to both Eliot and Riehl, to enact

any social policy which ignores or attempts to overcome the traditions which order the lives of a particular social group is to endanger society's all-important historical inheritance.

Throughout her study of Riehl, as in her novels, Eliot adopts and opposes the languages of mechanism and organism to emphasize the contrast between abstract theoretical systems and the social bodies they seek to govern. For instance, she writes,

> Instead of endeavouring to promote to the utmost the healthy life of the Commune, as an organism the conditions of which are bound up with the historical characteristics of the peasant, the bureaucratic plan of government is bent on improvement by its patent machinery of state appointed functionaries.... (*Essays* 282)

Eliot generally describes a civilization's connexion with the past in terms of its *vitality*. Throughout her article Eliot employs various metaphors of organic process to describe society—at times it is a human body, at others a tree whose roots are in the past, or an organic, evolving language; when she is not using such a metaphor, she frequently writes more explicitly of "social vitality" (*Essays* 287) and the "vital connexion with the past" (*Essays* 288). The language of mechanism, though less frequently used, has its evident place, too: bureaucratic governments govern by "undiscriminating, dead mechanism" (*Essays* 289) or the "equipment of theory" (*Essays* 290). There is, of course, a valuation and a warning implied by Eliot's language of vitality. The portrayal of civilization as an organism whose various institutions have grown historically is a view of society as a fragile and valued entity whose vitality is endangered by the arbitrary impositions of political theory.

Perhaps surprisingly, the highly valued sense of continuity with the past which is so eloquently expressed in the language of vitality is in clear opposition to the word 'culture.' In "The Natural History of German Life" 'culture' has two clearly distinct meanings. The first is roughly synonymous with the first of the 'new' meanings which, according to Raymond Williams, the nineteenth century assigned to the word. In Eliot's description of the German farmers' "mental culture" (*Essays* 273, 274), 'culture' simply means "a general state or habit of the mind" (Williams 16). More interesting, however, is the second meaning of the word, which is strongly suggestive of the forces that divide a man from his community and its past.

Eliot writes, "the cultured man acts more as an individual; the peasant, more as one of a group" (*Essays* 274); the "historical peculiarities" of rural dialects "gradually disappear under the friction of cultivated circles" (*Essays* 276); and, "[i]n the cultivated world each individual has his style of speaking and writing. But among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province that has its style" (*Essays* 275). Culture, then, represents a liberalizing force which disrupts the valued historical continuity, not (as one might expect from reading Eliot's novels) a conservatism which arises from a desire to protect this continuity. Fortunately, the contradiction is more apparent than real. Less than three years after the publication of "The Natural History of German Life," culture comes to signify—as it does thoughout the rest of Eliot's career—a historical inheritance which provides the basis for a moral education. In *Adam Bede* Eliot offers an unorthodox description of a Methodist meeting in

> the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith which was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with a sense of pitying, loving, infinite Presence.... (*AB* 81-82)

While the distrust of arbitrary legislation and the view of society as "incarnate history" both persist in Felix Holt's "Address to Working Men," this essay's main contributions to Eliot's concept of culture lie in the explicit portrayal of culture as—to use Matthew Arnold's expression—"the best that has been thought and said" (Arnold 5), and in the insistence upon culture as a system of social restraints by which the vitality of the social organism is protected. The "Address," which was written partly as a response to the passage of the Second Reform Bill, retains the sense of society as organism, a "wonderful slow-growing system of things" (*FH* 616) and a "living body in which all our lives are bound up" (*FH* 618). Here, however, organic society is threatened by a potential disorder which results from the extension of the franchise:

> Now, the danger hanging over change is great, just in proportion as it tends to produce such disorder by giving any large number of ignorant men, whose notions of what is good are of a low and brutal sort, the belief that they have got power into their hands, and may do pretty much as they like. (*FH* 618)

Throughout the "Address" the speaker betrays his fear that a too-hasty extension of the

franchise may allow the new voters to impose changes which will disrupt England's link with tradition and, along with that, its delicate cultural inheritance. Thus, the declared endeavour of Felix Holt's speech is to persuade the newly enfranchised workers to tend rather than uproot the organism of society.

As the authorial voice in the "Address," Felix Holt bases his argument upon the distinction between "Functions" and "Interests" (*FH* 617). Whereas functions are governed by "wisdom and virtue" (*FH* 610) and serve the general good, interests are governed by an absence of these qualities, an ignorant and active egoism, and serve much narrower concerns. Once interest is placed above duty, disorder, which risks spreading throughout the social organism, erupts:

> If [a man] says that in politics or in any sort of social action he will not care to know what are likely to be the consequences to others besides himself, he is defending the very worst doings that have brought about his discontent. He might as well say that there is no better rule needful for men than that each should tug and rive for what will please him, without caring how that tugging will act on the widespread network of society in which he is fast meshed. (*FH* 613-14)

Individual instances of egoism threaten to undermine the social order in a small way; but when personal interests are replaced by class interests, the potential for chaos increases immeasurably. Felix Holt, of course, argues the case for the placing of duty over interest. Through his numerous appeals to standards of "wisdom and virtue" (*FH* 610), he argues that even if submission to duty involves some self-denial, it is to a better end than submission to interest. We are frequently reminded that "the highest interest of mankind must at last be a common and not a divided interest" (*FH* 615). The moral goal of Felix Holt's "Address," then, is to persuade the imaginary audience that they must make the best use of their newly acquired power by cooperating not only as individuals within their own class but collectively with other classes to effect "the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions or duties" (*FH* 617).

If one turns from the moral argument of the "Address" to its discussion of culture, one soon notices that culture—or, to use Felix Holt's term, "the common estate of society" (*FH* 621)—is perhaps the thing which is most threatened by social chaos. Here, culture is both

analogous to and more sophisticated than the "rudimentary culture" of Methodism in *Adam Bede*. It is an "inheritance" (*FH* 622), a "treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling, and manners, great memories and the interpretation of great records, which is carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another" (*FH* 621). The particular risk to which culture is subjected arises from the fact that in its most refined forms it is largely—almost exclusively—in the keeping of the higher social classes. The risk, then, is that as a result of the extension of the franchise, "a class...who are chiefly struggling to get better and more food, clothing, and bodily recreation" (*FH* 622) may exert their collective will in such a way as to wrest all power from the classes who have historically been the guardians of culture.

But if culture is a kind of fragile inheritance of great thoughts and deeds which links a society with its past, and which risks being destroyed by the democratic impetus of English society, it is also almost synonymous—as Peter Coveney points out in his Introduction to the "Address" (*FH* 609)—with the "knowledge" whose practical purpose is to "find right remedies and right methods" (*FH* 625). Hence culture is both the source of all truly valuable social reform and the potential for the preservation of social order. Felix Holt stresses the dependence of society as a whole—including the working men—on the preservation of culture:

> If the claims of the unendowed multitude of working men hold within them the principles which must shape the future, it is not less true that the endowed classes, in their inheritance from the past, hold the precious material without which no worthy, noble future can be moulded. Many of the highest uses of life are in their keeping; and if privilege has often been abused, it also has been the nurse of excellence. Here again we have to submit ourselves to the great law of inheritance. (*FH* 626)

Culture, then, is something which is eventually if not immediately democratic; it is, Felix Holt tells the workers, "your own inheritance and the inheritance of your children" (*FH* 622). Moreover, it is a rudimentary sense of culture that Felix Holt invokes when he appeals to "the wisdom and virtue necessary to the right use of power" (*FH* 610). In practical terms 'democratic' culture takes the form of education:

> Let us demand that [the members of the unions] send their children to school, so as not to go on recklessly breeding a moral pestilence among us, just as strictly as we demand that they pay their contributions to a common fund, understood to be for a

common benefit. (*FH* 624)

Education performs a moral function by countering a "moral pestilence" and, by implication, contributing to the "common benefit." Education, then, is the immediate kind of culture which Eliot's speaker offers to the workers, the kind of culture in which lie Eliot's hopes for the preservation of an orderly society.

Culture, then, as Eliot understands it in "The Natural History of German Life" and Felix Holt's "Address to Working Men," depends on an undisturbed but tenuous connexion with the past. It is both a body of knowledge transmitted from generation to generation and a force of social restraint which resides not in orthodox religion, but in "knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling, and manners" (*FH* 621). It is the concept of culture as a means of safeguarding order and the importance of submitting to the authority of culture which Eliot develops in her late novels, and which provides an alternative to all the forms of egoism, of which imitative desire is certainly an important one.

III. "A life of vision and of choice": *Felix Holt, The Radical*

George Eliot finished *Felix Holt, The Radical*, the first of two novels set in the years of the first Reform Bill, a year before the second extension of the franchise. As its historical subject-matter and timely publication suggest, *Felix Holt* attests to an interest on Eliot's part in questions raised by the changing structure of English society. Here Eliot undertakes a serious examination of a democratic impetus which is only hinted at in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Seen in its historical context, the novel constitutes a rumination on two very different futures which might be born of the liberalizing tendencies in English society. In Treby Magna men and women choose between the new orders—and disorders—which present themselves in a world of increased personal freedom and social mobility. On the one hand, social ambition and class interest—which usually take the form of imitation of aristocratic models—threaten the social organism and the individual lives which are bound up with it. On the other, if social order is to be preserved in an increasingly democratic society, it will be preserved through what amounts to Eliot's most rudimentary formulation of the idea of culture—a renunciation of selfish interests and an adherence to individual and class duties. When one moves from the novel's political subject-matter to its treatment of individual characters—the level at which its qualities are best felt—it becomes clear that much of *Felix Holt* concerns itself specifically with Esther Lyon's education in responsible action, and with Mrs. Transome's tragic failure to acquire such an education.

Despite all the talk of elections and reform, *Felix Holt* demands to be understood as *political* in a sense which is at the same time more rudimentary and more far-reaching than mere preoccupation with party politics—that is, the novel concerns itself with matters which necessarily affect the health of the community. In Chapter 3, after describing the effects of industrialization on the town of Treby Magna, the narrator comments, in perhaps the best-known passage from *Felix Holt*, "These social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (*FH*

129). The suggestion of determinism is partly illusory: "a wider public life" determines each private life, but every private life also has some effect on the health of the community. It is through Felix Holt's pedagogical inclinations that Eliot makes this point frequently, if somewhat bluntly. For instance, at one point Felix tells Esther that one "may be either a blessing or a curse to many" (*FH* 211); elsewhere he frequently returns to such sentiments as "I will try to make life less bitter for a few within my reach" (*FH* 367) and "This world is not a very fine place for a good many of the people in it. But...it shan't be the worse for me" (*FH* 143). It is important to understand that Eliot's point (for Felix Holt is as much Eliot's spokesman here as he is in the "Address") is that there exists a mutual dependence between a community and its members. Or, to put it another way, the health of the social organism partly determines and is partly determined by the choices of individuals who make it up.

From the opening sentences of the "Author's Introduction" it becomes clear what kind of choice *Felix Holt* is most concerned with. Here, as in the two essays on culture, Eliot draws attention to the tendency of the progressivist forces in society to disrupt the organic nature of community. As Peter Coveney points out in his invaluable Introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, the narrator's anti-progressivist irony directs the reader's sympathies and begins to establish the importance of organic community very early on. Coveney argues that in the first part of the "Introduction," which takes the reader back into the pre-Reform England of 1831 (an England which is symbolically free of the impositions of political reform and industrialization), "there is no antithesis suggested between social Man and Nature" (Coveney 32). Here Eliot makes full imaginative use of the language of organic process which one finds in "The Natural History of German Life." Throughout the first part of the coach-ride the predominantly rural life of pre-Reform England is almost untouched by "that mysterious distant system of things called 'Gover'ment'" (*FH* 76), and in nearly complete harmony with nature. Here one finds "[t]he shepherd with a slow and slouching walk, timed by the walk of the grazing beasts" (*FH* 76), and a social life which, in general, takes place in the midst of abundant plant and animal life. But it is important to note that the portrayal of pre-industrial

life, while it is a mid-Victorian attempt at a sketch of the natural history of rural England, is untouched by the sentimentality which one might associate with the conservative "structure of feeling" of which Williams complains in *Culture and Society* (Williams 119). The attractions of rural life are carefully qualified by references to "pauper labourers," "sheep rot," "untidy kitchen garden[s]," and "gin-breathing tramps" (*FH* 77-78), while Eliot deploys her gentle irony to remind the reader of the ignorance of the peasants (which later becomes the novel's principal argument against hasty political reform): "the inhabitants were probably so free from superstition that they were in much less awe of the parson than of the overseer. Yet they were saved from the excesses of Protestantism by not knowing how to read, and by the absence of handlooms and mines to be the pioneers of Dissent: they were kept safely in the *via media* of indifference" (*FH* 77). In the second part of the metaphoric coach-ride the scene shifts to an industrialized England where the organic, rural society of the first part is in the process of being displaced by a mechanized urban society, and where one sees the "deformity and distortion of nature by industrialization" (Coveney 34). Here the ill-effects of industrialization, democracy, and Dissent are increasingly felt. While the pre-Reform shepherd's life was governed by natural cycles, the more modern coalminers "sleep through the day" and walk "queerly with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine" (*FH* 78). Moreover, English society can no longer be conceived as a single, unified organism; rather, it seems to have been split in two, for "town and country" now have "no pulse in common" (*FH* 80). The references to nature in the second half are kept to a minimum and applied only to the rural communities where "Time itself" seems to be "pausing" (*FH* 80), and urban social life takes place in the midst of "coal-dust," "the shaking of looms," and the "pavement of a manufacturing town" (*FH* 79). This fragmentation of social life and its dissociation from natural processes amounts to a violent disruption by recent social changes in English society of the properly organic nature of community. As suggested by the depiction of industrial England and Eliot's anti-progressivist irony ("Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes" [*FH*

75]), the loss of a unified social life is to be lamented, and the novel will place some value on what safeguards the organic nature of traditional society in the face of widespread social upheaval.

In the society of considerable social mobility which Eliot depicts, the choice which many—including, most importantly, Esther Lyon—are required to make is between social ambition and acceptance of their hereditary rank. But choice is problematic because it is sometimes influenced and sometimes almost completely denied by imitative desire. Here the mechanism of desire is essentially the same as in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. In Treby parish, however, there is a pervasive feeling of the prestige of rank, and with few exceptions the novel's characters imitate aristocratic models. In one sense, the new social mobility means that old absolutes of hereditary rank do less to determine one's lot in Treby Magna than in the communities of Hayslope and St Ogg's; in another, the prestige associated with rank raises the spectre of a new kind of determinism—for now men and women surrender their powers of choice to genteel models and actively seek to be recognized as equals by their traditional superiors. In the most obvious case Matthew Jermyn, a lawyer whom Harold's uncle Lingon describes as "one of your middle-class upstarts who want to rank with gentlemen" (*FH* 109), has acquired a considerable reputation through his influence with his former lover, Mrs. Transome, and now seeks social recognition from Harold Transome, his illegitimate son. Jermyn's imitation of gentlemanly models is obvious, though nowhere explicitly stated. "There was as strong a suggestion of toilette about him" we are told, "as if he had been five-and-twenty instead of nearly sixty. He chose always to dress in black, and was especially addicted to black satin waistcoats, which carried out the general sleekness of his appearance" (*FH* 112-13). Jermyn's speech is also calculated to convey an impression of gentility. It is hesitant, Latinate, periphrastic, and cultivated to the point of pedantry—all of which annoys Harold:

> 'A—pardon me, Mr Harold,' said Jermyn, speaking as soon as Johnson went out, 'but I am sorry—a—you should behave disobligingly to a man who has it in his power to do much service—who, in fact, holds many threads in his hands. I admit that—a—*nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit*, as we say—a—'

> 'Speak for yourself,' said Harold. 'I don't talk in tags of Latin, which might be learned by a schoolmaster's footboy. I find the King's English express my meaning better.'
>
> 'In the King's English, then,' said Jermyn who could be idiomatic enough when he was stung, 'a candidate should keep his kicks till he's a member.' (*FH* 285)

Harold, of course, has very good reasons for disliking the lawyer. He suspects Jermyn of mismanaging the Transome estate in his absence. But Harold also has a set of gentlemanly models which determine his opinions and conduct. His boyhood memories of Jermyn are fragmentary, but strongly influenced by a class pride which is at odds with his professed Radicalism. "Jermyn," he remembers, "was a man of business; his father, his uncle, and Sir Maximus Debarry did not regard him as a gentleman and their equal" (*FH* 112). Harold evidently also has aristocratic models in mind when he returns to England to claim his estate and run for parliament. He shrugs off the expense of paying off the mortgages by saying, "I suppose I should have spent more in buying an English estate some time or other. I always meant to be an Englishman, and thrash a lord or two who thrashed me at Eton" (*FH* 94). The first interview between father and son gives a good indication of what is to come:

> Harold continued his walking a moment longer, and then said to Jermyn—
>
> 'You smoke?'
>
> 'No, I always defer to the ladies. Mrs Jermyn is peculiarly sensitive on such matters and doesn't like tobacco.'
>
> Harold, who, underneath all the tendencies which had made him a Liberal, had intense personal pride, thought, 'Confound the fellow—with his Mrs Jermyn! Does he think we are on a footing for me to know anything about his wife?'
>
> 'Well, I took my hookah before breakfast,' he said aloud; 'so, if you like, we'll go into the library. My father never gets up till mid-day, I find.' (*FH* 117-18)

Eliot effectively conveys the tensions which invariably arise when a social climber who desires recognition meets a man who holds a position of rank and wishes to keep it. But it is important to note that Harold's dislike for Jermyn has already gone beyond purely practical considerations, and that imitation of an aristocratic ideal lies behind the behaviour of father and son alike. Moreover, Harold's scrupulous care in disguising his dislike for Jermyn and his immediate recourse to personal, almost intimate, discussion of the kind he despises coming from the lawyer suggest that he is already feeling the effects of internal mediation.

Were Harold concerned merely with the mismanagement of the Transome estate, then his response to Jermyn's attempt at blackmail would be purely pragmatic. But as the rivalry between father and son intensifies, Harold's hatred overshadows his original, practical misgivings about Jermyn and threatens to destroy the Transome estate. In short, the original grievances are swallowed up by a rivalry which becomes increasingly abstract:

> His nature was not of a kind given to internal conflict, and he had never before been long undecided and puzzled. This unaccustomed state of mind was so painfully irksome to him—he rebelled so impatiently against the oppression of circumstances in which his quick temperament and habitual decision could not help him—that it added tenfold to his hatred of Jermyn, who was the cause of it. And thus, as the temptation to avoid all risk of losing the estate grew and grew till scruples looked minute by the side of it, the difficulty of bringing himself to make a compact with Jermyn seemed more and more insurmountable. (*FH* 448)

Like Harold, Jermyn is prepared to risk much to defeat his rival. The narrator reminds us that an ambitious man like Jermyn, who is scrupulously attentive to the appearance he makes in public, "will probably prefer any private scorn that will save him from public infamy or that will leave him money in his pocket, to the humiliation and hardship of new servitude in old age, a shabby hat, and a melancholy hearth" (*FH* 512). In the last confrontation between Harold and his father, Eliot takes pains to stress the brutal opposition and near identity of the two combatants:

> 'Let me go, you scoundrel!' said Harold, fiercely, 'or I'll be the death of you.'
> 'Do,' said Jermyn, in a grating voice; '*I am your father.*'
> In the thrust by which Harold had been made to stagger backward a little, the two men had got very near the long mirror. They were both white; both had anger and hatred in their faces; the hands of both were upraised. As Harold heard the last terrible words he started at a leaping throb that went through him, and in the start turned his eyes from Jermyn's face. He turned them on the same face in the glass with his own beside it, and saw the hated fatherhood reasserted. (*FH* 581)

Significantly, both men are once again defined by the model of gentlemanly conduct which has led to their downfall. Jermyn is effectively banished by Sir Maximus' words, "Leave the room, Sir!.... This is a meeting of gentlemen" (*FH* 581), and Harold finds some comfort in the reflection that "if the circumstances of his birth were such as to warrant any man in regarding his character of gentleman with ready suspicion, that character should be the more strongly asserted in his conduct" (*FH* 582). Neither seems very much the wiser for his experience.

The pattern of extreme rivalry is never quite repeated. That it occurs at all between two men of such different rank attests to a comparatively democratic society, in which hereditary rank does not necessarily define social distance. Nevertheless, imitation of gentlemanly models—in the form of both external and mild internal mediation—recurs frequently throughout the novel. Hints of a new social mobility and its importance to imitative desire are evident even in the nominal stronghold of Conservatism, the household of Sir Maximus Debarry, where the rules governing station have lapsed unnoticed. Here the servants are allowed to forget their proper stations by Sir Maximus, who "treated a servant more deferentially than an equal" (*FH* 308) and "greeted his head-servants with a 'good evening, gentlemen,' when he met them in the park" (*FH* 183). And so, in the absence of a strong sense that birth irrevocably determines rank, such rival gentleman-servants as Christian and Scales dress up and conduct themselves as men of degree. Christian, who "never allowed himself to be treated as a servant by any one but his master" (*FH* 308), spends his spare time in the Debarrys' Steward's room, coolly asserting his superiority, while Scales, "a man most solicitous about his boots, wristbands, the roll of his whiskers, and other attributes of a gentleman, distribute[s] cigars, cognac, and whiskey" (*FH* 183-84). The familiar pattern of gentlemanly imitation, so evident in the Steward's room, is repeated during the market dinner in Chapter 20, when Christian again asserts his superiority:

> When general attention was called to Christian, young Joyce looked down at his own legs and touched the curves of his own hair, as if measuring his own approximation to that correct copy of a gentleman. Mr Wace turned his head to listen for Christian's answer with that tolerance of inferiority which becomes men in places of public resort. (*FH* 305)

Again it must be noticed that such "copies" of gentlemen proliferate not in the communities of *Adam Bede* or *The Mill on the Floss*, but in a society whose hierarchical social structures are showing significant signs of stress, if not yet of collapse.

In *Felix Holt* the imitation of aristocratic models, which usually begins as external mediation, often leads to internal mediation by which personal relationships and the social organism alike are disturbed. One soon notices that the aristocratic ideal which possesses so

many minds is defined almost solely in terms of such external qualities of rank as tastes, comportment, and patterns of speech. The characters who build an altar to these qualities tend to see right opinions and morality as the necessary sacrifices. Esther, we learn from Felix, "didn't mind about people having right opinions so long as they had good taste" (*FH* 159), while Harold

> was certainly too particular about sauces, gravies, and wines, and had a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure. His very good-nature was unsympathetic: it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged.... (*FH* 528)

Such ways of thinking certainly project an impression of indifference to others and resist coherent standards by which harmonious and stable relations can be established. And though it is the aura of self-sufficiency—Christian's coolness, Jermyn's bland gallantry, and Mrs. Transome's imperiousness—which makes the aristocratic model so appealing to anyone suffering from metaphysical desire, the notable absence of any *objective* standards of judgment makes each rivalry between self-styled gentlemen a struggle in which the contenders can offer only the most hollow justifications for their actions. As Jermyn and Harold try in vain to hide their complete dependence on aristocratic models, right and wrong become the cant-words of self-justification. After Mrs. Transome rejects Jermyn's half-phrased request that she tell her son of his parentage, Jermyn begins to rationalize his wish:

> In fact—he asked, with a touch of something that makes us all akin—was it not preposterous, this excess of feeling on points which he himself did not find powerfully moving? She had treated him most unreasonably. It would have been right for her to do what he had—not asked, but only hinted at in a mild and interrogatory manner. But the clearest and most unpleasant result of the interview was, that this right thing which he desired so much would certainly not be done for him by Mrs. Transome. (*FH* 521).

The irony of Jermyn's position—the lame rationalization and the self-deception—is conveyed, evidently enough, in the imprecision of "what he had...only hinted at" and "this right thing." On the political level of the novel, fascination with the aristocratic model also leads to internal mediation as well as to a more wide-spread disruption of the social order. Like Johnson, who plants in his working-class audience the desire to be "on a level with the first gentleman in the

land" (*FH* 229), the Chartist speaker of Chapter 30 wants to see "any fine carved gold-headed stick of an aristocrat [who] will make a broom-stick of himself" (*FH* 398) In the Chartist's speech one again notices the mediator's prestige (now resting in the aristocrats' power rather than in the superficial indicators of rank), the impassioned subject's resentment of his mediator, and his vain attempts at self-justification, all of which are the familiar marks of internal mediation. Here again language is emptied of meaning in the Chartist speaker's unconvincing attempt at persuading his audience of a qualitative difference between power-hungry aristocrats and power-hungry Radicals:

> [W]e must get the suffrage, we must get votes, that we may send men to parliament who will do our work for us; and we must have parliament dissolved every year, that we may change our man if he doesn't do what we want him to do; and we must have the country divided so that the little kings of the counties can't do as they like, but must be shaken up in one bag with us. (*FH* 397)

The desire for aristocratic power and the resentment of the aristocratic class for the obstacles it provides to the attainment of power join forces to perform the mental acrobatics necessary for the dubious distinction between the good of doing "what we want" and the evil of doing "as they like." What is desired really is perhaps "a man's share in what goes on in life" (*FH* 395), but there is an obvious fallacy in the supposition that the aristocrats can be no more than malevolent obstacles or that universal suffrage will mean the end of the abuse of power. The prospect offered by the Chartist—a prospect borne out by the opinions of such characters as the publican Chubb, by the ease with which Johnson bribes the working men, and by the election-day riot itself—is that the mob will act purely according to a self-interest which is partly dictated by its envy of those with more wealth.

The problems of individual and collective behaviour in *Felix Holt* can be traced to a common cause. In a society in which hierarchical social structures are at the point of being recognized as arbitrary, the comparative ease of social movement gives free rein to the ambitious—or rather, it gives way to the new determinism of imitative desire. In the absence of any objective standards of value and conduct, nearly everyone falls back on the imitation of an aristocratic ideal which, as Felix Holt points out, is generally understood as little more than a

code of "dress, behaviour, amusements, ornaments" (*FH* 209). Once the accepted idea of the gentleman becomes less a matter of hereditary rank than of acquired social skills, all can be gentlemen, and any meeting between such self-styled gentlemen as Harold Transome and Jermyn or Christian and Scales is likely to result in a rivalry in which each tries to out-gentleman the other. A similar connexion between democratic social structures and imitation is evident in the more obviously political concerns of the novel. The extension of the franchise is the novel's central symbol of the new social mobility; nevertheless, the appeal of the aristocratic model remains strong, and even the working-class Radicals feel the desirability of aristocratic power. As the Chartist speaker reveals, the prospect of a more democratic government gives rise to the certainty of competing class interests. But in the usual dissimulation which occurs in internal mediation, the Radical leaders rail against the aristocratic monopoly of power while they clearly desire what they see as the great aristocratic crime, the self-interested use of power. If, then, as the Chartist unwittingly suggests, the mob will act according to the same principles of imitation as individuals, then disorder will ensue on a scale only hinted at by the Treby election-day riot.

If the political radicalism represented by the Radical party portends unrestrained democracy and the attendant free-for-all of social ambition and imitation, Felix Holt's radicalism offers the moral and political alternative which the novel endorses. That Eliot's novel should take as its title the young worker's name and the epithet he gives himself attests more to the importance of what Felix Holt represents than to his interest as a character. On the surface, the hero seems little more than a personification of some doctrine of political quietism. In his first interview with Rufus Lyon he rejects the ambitious scramble for social prestige, saying, "I'll take no employment that obliges me to prop up my chin with a high cravat, and wear straps.... That sort of work is really lower than many handicrafts" (*FH* 144). As far as his political aspirations go, he is a self-styled "demagogue of a new sort," who will bluntly remind the workers that they are "blind and foolish" (*FH* 366). In his rebuttal of the Chartist's speech, he rejects the purely formal changes to the structure of political

decision-making when he tells the working men, "votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now" (*FH* 399). His scornful opinion of the Radical and Chartist movements seems even less likely to win him allies. He alone opposes election bribery and sees behind the empty rhetoric of "men who have no real opinions, but who pilfer the words of every opinion, and turn them into a cant which will serve their purpose" (*FH* 402). Of course, his misgivings and harsh opinions are all justified by the action of the novel—in particular, by the election-day riot in which he finds his movements nightmarishly dictated by the whims of the mob. Taken, then, as a speaker of sceptical remarks about the value of scrambling for social recognition and tinkering with the machinery of legislation, Felix Holt really does sound more like a Tory than a Radical.

Given Felix Holt's at least superficial resemblance to a middle-class idea of the perfect workman, it is perhaps not at all surprising that the novel has been considered by such critics as Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle as, finally, an example of a middle-class fear of mob violence and the political conservatism it gives rise to.[6] According to Williams' argument, the action of the novel, particularly Felix Holt's innocent involvement in the Treby riot, is an *ex post facto* proof of Eliot's belief "that the popular movements underway are actually foolish and inadequate, and that the only wise course is dissociation from them" (Williams 115). Although Williams concedes that the novel's political position "proceeds...from the sense of society as a complicated inheritance which is at the root of [Eliot's] finest work" (118), he contends that Eliot's "personal observations and conclusion surrender, virtually without a fight, to the general structure of feeling" about political reform, and that the novel reaches a conclusion where "[a]lmost any social action is ruled out" (119). Taken in context, however, even Felix Holt's rejection of social ambition is more affirmation than renunciation. "If there's

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[6]Raymond Williams' treatment of *Felix Holt* is to be found in *Culture and Society*, Arnold Kettle's in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*. Although Kettle's lengthier study argues that *Felix Holt* starts off auspiciously enough, as an examination of two kinds of Radicalism, Kettle agrees with Williams that the novel lapses into a sort of political quietism. For Kettle *Felix Holt* is representative of "the tendency of writers in the 1860s...to look at life more from the point of view of the modern middle-class intellectual with his own peculiar mixture of high-mindedness and blindness."

anything our people want convincing of," he argues, "it is that, there's some dignity and happiness for a man other than changing his station" (*FH* 557):

> I have my heritage—an order I belong to. I have the blood of handicraftsmen in my veins, and I want to stand up for the lot of the handicraftsmen as a good lot, in which a man may be better trained to all the best functions of his nature than if he belonged to the grimacing set who have visiting cards.... (*FH* 366)

The value of one's "heritage," "a lot" in which each may learn "all the best functions of his nature" may seem an essentially conservative idea, but neither Felix Holt nor the novel rejects the eventual desirability of political reform. However, it is characteristic of Eliot and her spokesman that they reject the idea of political reform as an end in itself. Felix argues:

> The way to get rid of folly is to get rid of vain expectations, and of thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things. The men who have had true thoughts about water, and what it will do when it is turned into steam and under all sorts of circumstances, have made themselves a great power in the world: they are turning the wheels of engines that will help to change most things. But no engines would have done, if there had been false notions about the way water would act. Now, all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam—the force that is to work them—must come out of human nature—out of men's passions, feelings, desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings; and if we have false expectations about men's characters, we are very much like the idiot who thinks he'll carry milk in a can without a bottom. (*FH* 400)

The cautious words about political reform are reminiscent of Eliot's remark that it would be "wise to pause a little from theorizing, and see what is the material actually present for theory to work upon" (*Essays* 289). The electoral machinery can only perform its *desired* function if it is based on a sound understanding of human nature, and not on "thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things." Eliot's distrust of the impositions of abstract theory, so evident in "The Natural History of German Life," is once again obvious here. Wrong ideas about the nature of steam lead to exploding engines; wrong ideas about the wisdom of the new electorate are just as likely to have destructive consequences for the community. As things stand, the majority of men are incapable of responsible political choice: "the political power of the thirty sober men" will invariably be overrun by "seventy drunken and stupid votes" (*FH* 401). It is important to understand that Felix Holt—and presumably he is as much Eliot's spokesman here as he is anywhere else in the novel—rather hopes for than fears the possibility of universal

suffrage: "I hope we, or the children that come after us, will get plenty of political power sometime" he remarks; but the necessary precondition of a *moral* revolution follows immediately: "I hope there will be great changes, and that some time...men will have come to be ashamed of things they're proud of now" (*FH* 399).

Felix Holt's contention that the "engines" of political reform may do "good work or bad" depending on men's "passions, feelings, desires" forces an examination (which the novel undertakes) of the quality of those "passions, feelings, desires." Raymond Williams, however, avoids this issue, arguing, "the real criticism, one suspects, is of 'thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things,' and this 'nature of things' can be either a supposed 'human nature,' or else, as probably, the supposedly immutable 'laws of society'" (Williams 116). As his argument continues, it becomes clear that Williams is concerned only with the "supposedly immutable 'laws of society.'" The problem of course is that nowhere does Eliot even suggest that there is anything *immutable* about these "laws," and particularly not about the "law" which provides Williams' one example—the probability that out of every hundred workers there will be "seventy drunken and stupid votes" (*FH* 401). Here is the passage which immediately precedes the "immutable 'law'" to which Williams objects:

> 'I'll tell you what's the greatest power under heaven,' said Felix, 'and that is public opinion—the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful. That's the steam that is to work the engines. How can political freedom make us better, any more than a religion we don't believe in, if people laugh and wink when they see men abuse and defile it? And while public opinion is what it is—while men have no better beliefs about public duty—while corruption is not felt to be a damning disgrace—while men are not ashamed in parliament and out of it to make public questions which concern the welfare of millions a mere screen for their own petty and private ends,—I say, no fresh scheme of voting will much mend our condition.' (*FH* 401)

Since the criticism of universal suffrage is qualified by one conditional and four temporal clauses, it ought to be obvious that there is nothing at all "immutable" about the state of affairs. On the contrary, what Felix Holt calls for—implicitly here, but explicitly elsewhere—is an education in the distinctions between "what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful" as the necessary precondition for a further extension of the franchise. This idea constitutes the kind of radicalism which the novel endorses; it is the driving force

behind all of Felix's speech-making, his pedagogical bent (which achieves its great success in the education of Esther), and his desire to set up a school: "I'll lay hold of them by their fatherhood.... I'll take one of their little fellows and set him in the midst. Till they can show there's something they love better than swilling themselves with ale, extension of the suffrage can never mean anything for them but extension of boozing" (*FH* 219). This belief in the value of an education in social duty—a belief that there are objective standards which can be taught and can supply the necessary and proper alternative to individual and class interests—is Eliot's most rudimentary formulation of the idea of culture, and offers the alternative to the destructive imitation of genteel models.

Felix Holt makes its most persuasive case for this concept of culture in its treatment of the divergent fates of Mrs. Transome and Esther Lyon. Early in the novel we are alerted to certain similarities between Esther and the young Mrs. Transome which suggest that the two women are to be considered in connexion with each other. In particular (in a pattern which Girard finds in the major European novelists), both strive to become ideal aristocrats through the imitation of models they find in fashionable literature. Like Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, Mrs. Transome and Esther Lyon are the victims of the books they read. Thirty years before the action of the novel, when she was Miss Lingon, Mrs. Transome

> had been thought wonderfully clever and accomplished, and had been rather ambitious of intellectual superiority—had secretly picked out for private reading the lighter parts of dangerous French authors—and in company had been able to talk of Mr Burke's style, or of Chateaubriand's eloquence—had laughed at the *Lyrical Ballads* and admired Mr Southey's 'Thalaba.' She always thought that the dangerous French writers were wicked, and that her reading of them was a sin; but many sinful things were highly agreeable to her, and many things which she did not doubt to be good and true were dull and meaningless. (*FH* 104-5)

Mrs. Transome's girlhood reading—like Maggie Tulliver's—is more than just an index to her character; it partly determines the life of the adult woman. Chateaubriand and Burke contribute to a sense of class distinctions which is more clearly seen in Mrs. Transome than in any other character, while the "dangerous French authors" supply a "clever sinner...with the views, the reasons, and the habits which belonged to that character" (*FH* 91). Though Esther Lyon's attitudes about rank have been influenced by her work as a governess, her fashionable

reading—which also includes Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du Christianisme*, as well as Byron's poetry—has had a large part in forming her notions of aristocratic prestige and behaviour. Her reading, particularly of Byron, supplies her with some ideas about the attributes of 'model' gentlemen, and when she begins to sense Felix Holt's superiority, she finds herself wishing that a "finished gentleman were among her acquaintance: he would certainly admire her, and make her aware of Felix's inferiority" (*FH* 207). Most importantly, however, Esther's reading has instilled in her a sensibility, similar to Mrs. Transome's, by which she too values fashion over morality:

> It was not religious differences, but social differences, that Esther was concerned about.... [S]he was alive to the finest shades of manner, to the nicest distinctions of tone and accent; she had a little code of her own about scents and colours, textures and behaviour, by which she secretly condemned or sanctioned all things and persons. And she was well satisfied with herself for her fastidious taste, never doubting that hers was the highest standard. (*FH* 159)

The strong sense of aristocratic prestige, which gives rise to and is aggravated by the imitation of aristocratic literary models, provides the starting point from which the fates of the two heroines diverge.

Despite the original similarity between the two women, Mrs. Transome's first appearance shows that the years have made her strikingly different from both Esther and the "wonderfully clever and accomplished" Miss Lingon whom the narrator describes. Her once-valued accomplishments now seem to Mrs. Transome "as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the substance was never worth anything" (*FH* 106). In fact, it appears that she has long understood that her genteel education could not fulfil the promise of happy self-sufficiency—or, in Girard's terms, "metaphysical autonomy" (Girard 56)—which is the goal of imitation. And so, the narrator tells us, Mrs. Transome begins to imagine that the elusive sense of completeness resides in the possibility that her second son will some day return to claim the Transome estate. The keyword is "unity":

> She had thought that the possession of this child would give unity to her life, and make some gladness through the changing years that would grow up as fruit out of these early maternal caresses. But nothing had come just as she had wished. The mother's early raptures had lasted but a short time, and even while they lasted there had grown up in the midst of them a hungry desire, like a black poisonous plant

> feeding in the sunlight,—the desire that her first, rickety, ugly, imbecile child should die, and leave room for her darling, of whom she could be proud. Such desires make life a hideous lottery, where every day may turn up a blank. (*FH* 97-98)

Mrs. Transome's reasoning is clear: if only Durfey would die and Harold were to return to England, then all would be well. Or, to put it in general terms, if only the obstacles to one's wishes could be removed, then the fulfilment of desire would bring "unity" to one's life. But in the pattern typical of imitative desire Mrs. Transome finds that the fulfilment of desire—where fulfilment is possible—means only disappointment: the acquisition of the desired object never brings with it the "unity" which it at first seems to offer because it does not change the impassioned subject's fundamental self-doubts. In the same way that neither ladylike accomplishments nor the birth of a second son could bring her "unity" or "metaphysical autonomy," the desired return of an undesirably independent son brings disappointment:

> The mother's love is at first an absorbing delight; it is an expression of animal existence; it enlarges the imagined range for self to move in: but in after years it can only continue to be joy on the same terms as other long-lived love—that is, by much suppression of self, and power of living in the experience of another. Mrs Transome had darkly felt the pressure of that unchangeable fact. Yet she had clung to the belief that somehow the possession of this son was the best thing she lived for.... (*FH* 98)

The ironic force of the word "possession" in the two passages cited above portends a fundamental change in the nature of Mrs. Transome's relations with those around her. Though she is used to mastery, and though she still tyrannizes over the servants and her husband as she once tyrannized over Jermyn and dominated Harold, Mrs. Transome is soon to be confronted by the unalterable fact of both her son's and her former lover's independence.

As it turns out, Mrs. Transome's life becomes even more of a lottery after Harold's return. She is placed in a position of powerlessness because her single desire—Harold's return to Transome Estate under *her* domination—is constantly thwarted by Harold himself. She has, in short, finally come up against an unconquerable mediator and an insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilment of her desire.[7] Rather than renounce her hope of seeing Harold as a Tory and

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[7]In Girard's system Mrs. Transome can be described as a "masochist." The masochist is someone whose desire, having led him to an unconquerable mediator and an insurmountable obstacle, finds himself in complete subjection. Nevertheless, the masochist is aware that this subjection is the inevitable result of the impossible desire. Despite the obvious connexion between the desire and the misery it causes,

(more importantly) an obedient son, she insists on believing that if only he would show some dependence on her, joy would be restored to her life: "If Harold had shown the least care to have her stay in the room with him—if he had really cared for her opinion—if all the past could be dissolved, and leave no solid trace of itself—mighty *ifs* that were all impossible—she would have tasted some joy" (*FH* 199). To make matters worse, despite her attempts at exacting a promise from Jermyn that he will not quarrel with Harold, Mrs. Transome is powerless to stop the rivalry which erupts between the two men. She is mastered by both, and the results are despair and the paralysis of her will. Her initial "presentiment of...powerlessness" (*FH* 101) is soon confirmed. In an early meeting with Jermyn, Mrs. Transome warns, "I have no power over [Harold]—remember that—none" (*FH* 201); later, when asked by the lawyer why she did not prevent Harold's legal revenge, she replies, "I do care. It makes me miserable. That is the extent of my power—to feel miserable" (*FH* 517). Thwarted at last by an obstacle too great to overcome, and subject to the will of both son and former lover, Mrs. Transome can only watch helplessly as the two men try to destroy each other.

Mrs. Transome's life as the votary of a false religion—the deviated transcendency offered by aristocatic imitation—has landed her in a living hell, and the paralysis of her will is often described in language which reveals the difference between vertical and deviated transcendencies. As Peter Coveney points out, from the first reference to Dante's *Inferno* in the "Author's Introduction," Eliot makes almost constant association between Mrs. Transome and the underworld, thereby conveying a sense of her "fate as a living death" (Coveney 40). She is shown as a pale figure, dressed in a "smart shroud" (*FH* 486), lamenting "I am not at rest" (*FH* 489), and, in a useful adaptation of Gothic convention, "pacing the corridor like an uneasy spirit without a goal" (*FH* 596, 593). These descriptions of Mrs. Transome's death-in-life are associated with the language of religion which, like the description of Hetty's and Dinah's bed-chambers in *Adam Bede*, reveals the opposition between the two

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[7](cont'd) the masochist does not renounce the unfulfillable desire because "the most impassable obstacle...indicates the presence of the most divine mediator" (Girard 179).

transcendencies.[1] The "clever sinner" (*FH* 97) who had originally thought that the afterlife "would preserve the existing arrangements of English society quite unshaken" (*FH* 105) eventually discovers that her own desires have destroyed her once complacent faith. The vertical and deviated transcendencies exclude each other. Mrs. Transome's choice of an aristocratic model, made so many years before and never changed, has placed her in a slave-like existence which seems to her to exclude Christian grace. Here she speaks of the prospect of Harold's marrying Esther:

> A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing. This girl [Esther] has a fine spirit—plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit and paw the ground: they feel more triumph in their mastery. What is the use of a woman's will?—if she tries, she doesn't get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when he made women. (*FH* 488)

What is only half-understood by Mrs. Transome—that her subjection to Harold amounts to a renunciation of Christianity and a deification of her son—is made explicit by the narrator: "Unable to walk about any longer, she sank into a large cushioned chair, helpless and prayerless. She was not thinking of God's anger or mercy, but of her son's. She was thinking of what might be brought, not by death, but by life" (*FH* 438). We see in Mrs. Transome's life the usual progression of imitative desire. The false promise of unity at first held out by a genteel education and the imitation of aristocratic models, and later reasserted by other, equally illusory desires, has led Mrs. Transome step by step into an underground of misery and spiritual slavery.

It is mainly Eliot's treatment of Mrs. Transome, Harold, and Jermyn which accounts for the novel's lasting interest. F.R. Leavis draws attention to the combination of "impersonality" and "sympathy" which, starting with the Transome plot in *Felix Holt*,

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[1]Perhaps the clearest and most succinct—though not the most important—instance of the opposition between vertical and deviated transcendencies is in a paragraph which describes Mrs. Transome's servant Denner. This woman, who is a "slave" to Mrs. Transome (*FH* 103), is described both as having a "feeling towards her mistress...of that worshipful sort paid to a goddess in ages when it was not thought necessary or likely that a goddess should be very moral" and as "a hard-headed godless little woman" (*FH* 102). Of course, the second reference is to be taken as 'straight' while the first implies a criticism of Denner.

characterizes Eliot's mature art (Leavis 69-71). Impersonality, Leavis argues, guards against the tendency towards idealization and sentimentality which so seriously mars *The Mill on the Floss*. And, with characteristic insight, he remarks that Eliot "has not here, it will be noted, a heroine with whom she can be tempted to identify herself" (Leavis 70). As is so often the case, Leavis' comment provides a direct route to understanding. In telling the story of the Transomes, Eliot does not feel the blinding influence of her own mediators. Impersonality is ensured because there is neither a mediator through whom Eliot desires nor a character (like Maggie Tulliver) who might become the instrument of Eliot's self-justification. Because these conditions are met, Eliot can convey, convincingly and sympathetically, the slow, relentless unravelling of the lives of Mrs. Transome, her son, and the lawyer Jermyn.

Eliot's triumph does not, however, (as Leavis also points out) extend to her treatment of Esther Lyon and Felix Holt, though the connexion between the two plots is crucial to the novel's meaning. As the action begins, Esther Lyon's behaviour—like that of Mrs. Transome and so many other characters—is marked by the imitation of aristocratic models. When Felix Holt first sees her he is struck by the incongruity between her lot in life and her social pretentions:

> [T]hough he had expected something nowise delightful, the incongruity repelled him. A very delicate scent, the faint suggestion of a garden, was wafted as she went. He would not observe her, but he had a sense of an elastic walk, the tread of small feet, a long neck and a high crown of shining brown plaits with curls that floated backward—things, in short, that suggested a fine lady to him.... (*FH* 149)

In attempts to make herself more genteel, Esther spends a quarter's earnings on a gold watch, and, like Hetty Sorrel, insists on using wax candles, which are more genteel than tallow. She prides herself on being described by her social superiors as "well educated and ladylike" (*FH* 153) and enjoys ridiculing those who do not live up to her "little code" of aristocratic behaviour (*FH* 159). Her idea of aristocratic existence is a dream of "Utopia" in which she "had her servants about her filled with adoring respect, because of her kindness as well as her grace and beauty; and she...had several accomplished cavaliers all at once suing for her hand" (*FH* 473). The reality is, of course, that like other victims of metaphysical desire, Esther hides

her considerable self-doubts behind the imitation of an admirable model. Despite her airs of fashionable superiority, the young woman relies on what others think of her (this is evident in her need to have even her imaginary servants "adore" her) and has a particular "horror of appearing ridiculous even in the eyes of vulgar Trebians" (*FH* 161). She is, in short, unable to judge herself except as a reflexion in the eyes of others.

Esther feels Felix Holt's influence almost immediately. Though her remark to her father that Felix "speaks better English than most of our visitors" is followed by the rueful reflection that she thought he was "something higher" than a working man (*FH* 156), Esther soon begins to have "a secret consciousness that [Felix] was her superior" (*FH* 207). Before she is willing to admit it, the allure of her genteel models is being displaced by admiration of Felix Holt:

> She could not bear that Felix should not respect her, yet she could not bear that he should see her bend before his denunciation. She revolted against his assumption of superiority, yet she felt herself in a new kind of subjection to him.... For the first time in her life Esther felt herself seriously shaken in her self-contentment. She knew there was a mind to which she appeared trivial, narrow, selfish. Every word Felix had said to her seemed to have burnt itself into her memory. She felt as if she should for evermore be haunted by self-criticism, and never do anything to satisfy those fancies on which she had simply piqued herself before without being dogged by inward questions. Her father's desire for her conversion had never moved her; she saw he adored her all the while.... But now she had been stung—stung even into a new consciousness concerning her father. Was it true that his life was so much worthier than her own? She could not change for anything Felix said, but she told herself he was mistaken if he supposed her incapable of generous thoughts. (*FH* 213-14)

It is the "assumption of superiority" which gives Felix the power which Esther's father, who "adored her," lacks. The superiority which Esther does not yet consciously admit gives rise to the unsettling "hard questions" and "self-criticism." Although Esther tells herself that she "could not change for anything Felix said," Felix's influence is already noticeable in her "new consciousness concerning her father."

As Felix Holt's positive mediation grows stronger, Esther begins to scrutinize her old models and see their inadequacy as guides for the serious matter of living. As she becomes more aware of Felix's superiority, her "favorite Byronic heroes" begin to seem "something like last night's decorations seen in the sober dawn" (*FH* 327). Moreover, what was formerly

unthinkable—that in the "Utopia" of genteel life anyone could be unhappy—becomes increasingly apparent to Esther:

> Glimpses of of the Lingon heraldry in their freshness were interesting to Esther; but it occurred to her that when she had known about them a good while they would cease to be succulent themes of converse or meditation, and Mrs Transome, having known them all along, might have felt a vacuum in spite of them. (*FH* 494)

More importantly, however, the effects of Felix's influence begin to show in Esther's behaviour. When she learns that her parents really were people of rank, she begins to see in her adoptive father "the object of a new sympathy in which [she] found herself exalted" (*FH* 354). News that would formerly have given Esther cause to ponder only her own genteel birth now excites admiration for her adoptive father because of "the mental preparation that had come during the last two months from her acquaintance with Felix Holt" (*FH* 354). In matters more directly related to her own aristocratic pretensions, Esther's development is a little more gradual:

> 'I am happy to see at least that you wear the Liberal colours.' [said Harold]
> 'I fear I must confess that it is more from love of blue than from love of Liberalism. Yellow opinions could only have brunettes on their side.' Esther spoke with her usual pretty fluency, but she had no sooner uttered the words than she thought how angry they would have made Felix. (*FH* 266)

The above passage is typical. Throughout most of the novel Esther is passing over the ground which lies between the ideals of aristocratic behaviour and of culture. Here, as elsewhere, she is aware that the life represented by Felix Holt is, indeed, the better of the two, yet she is still unwilling to renounce the easier imitation of aristocratic behaviour.

As the day of Felix's trial approaches, Esther is confronted by the need to choose between the new life offered her by her inheritance of the Transome estate and the kind of life which Felix has been suggesting. Late in the novel, her experience has still not proved decisive. She finds that her "heart [is] divided and oppressed," and her stay at Transome Court "instead of bringing her nearer to clearness and decision, had only brought [a] state of disenchantment" (*FH* 550). Significantly, in the choice which Esther faces the need for unity is again invoked, as it was in Eliot's treatment of Mrs. Transome:

> It seemed to her that she stood at the first and last parting of the ways. And, in one

> sense, she was under no illusion. It is only in that freshness of our time that the choice is possible which gives unity to life, and makes the memory a temple where all relics and all votive offerings, all worship and all grateful joy, are an unbroken history sanctified by one religion. (*FH* 551)

Here the goal of unity—with all the emphatic reinforcement provided by "one," "unbroken," and the repetition of "all"—is expressly linked with the language of religion. But Esther's choice of "one religion" has still not been made, and when she visits Felix in gaol, she fears that even he will have lost some of his appeal:

> It seemed to her as if he too would look altered after her new life—as if even the past would change for her and be no longer a steadfast remembrance, but something she had been mistaken about, as she had been about the new life....The dread concentrated in those moments seemed worse than anything she had known before. It was what the dread of a pilgrim might be who has it whispered to him that the holy places are a delusion, or that he will see them with a soul unstirred and unbelieving. (*FH* 554-55)

Esther *does* perceive Felix differently, but not in the way she fears. Something about the young worker now seems "inexpressibly better" (*FH* 555): it is the "new life" that loses its glamour. When Esther finally makes her decision, the "one religion" which she decides upon entails the rejection of the Byronic models which "embodied the faith and ritual of many young ladies and gentlemen" including, once, Esther herself (*FH* 151).

Although Girard's 'fundamentalist' tendency holds that "true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine mediator" (Girard 58), Felix Holt is neither the bearer of an explicitly Christian message nor a destructive mediator like the Byronic heroes he opposes. Nevertheless, the use the narrator makes of the language of religion makes it clear that Felix Holt's idea of culture provides an important alternative to the deviated transcendency of aristocratic imitation. Felix's great success lies, of course, in his educating Esther's "best self" (*FH* 366) in the importance of standards of conduct which do not merely serve human vanity.[9] Esther's education consists partly in her "new consciousness concerning her father,"

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[9]Eliot's use of the term "best self" in connexion with Esther's moral education ought to remind one of Matthew Arnold's use of the same term in *Culture and Anarchy*. At one point Felix says to Esther, "I want you to have such a vision of the future that you may never lose your best self. Some charm or other may be flung about you—some of your atta-of-rose fascinations—and nothing but a good strong terrible vision will save you" (*FH* 366). In the chapter entitled "Doing as One Likes," Matthew Arnold also refers to the education of the "best self" as the

and partly in her overcoming her fear of looking ridiculous; but its essential aspect is in allowing her to renounce social ambition and dedicate herself to Felix's vision of the common good. In chapter 27 Felix and Esther walk out of town and, in a natural world which recalls the pre-Reform England of the "Author's Introduction," Felix defends what he calls his "inward vocation" (*FH* 367). Significantly, his vocation is the product of his "history" and "nature" (*FH* 362), and is concerned with making the best of the history and nature of his fellow men:

> I want to be a demagogue of a new sort; an honest one, if possible, who will tell the people they are blind and foolish, and neither flatter them nor fatten on them. I have my heritage—an order I belong to. I have the blood of a line of handicraftsmen in my veins, and I want to stand up for the lot of the handicraftsmen as a good lot, in which a man may be better trained to all the best functions of his nature than if he belonged to the grimacing set who have visiting-cards, and are proud to be thought richer than their neighbors. (*FH* 366)

Though the substance of what Felix believes has perhaps been only partly understood by Esther up until now, she becomes increasingly aware, as she sees through the illusory appeal of Transome Court, that the unity which she seeks is to be found, not in her father's religion, but in the kind of humanism that Felix endorses: the acceptance of one's own "heritage" and training in "all the best functions of his nature."

While in the Transome plot Eliot maintains the combination of "impersonality" and "sympathy" which Leavis praises, there is in Esther's education an element of wish fulfilment which reminds one of *The Mill on the Floss*. Felix Holt is not so much a character from whom Eliot can distance herself and her reader as the embodiment of all that the author and her novel stand for. An overblown self-confidence, which needs to be deflated by some pin-prick of irony, is at once evident in Felix's speech, even in his account of his conversion by "six weeks' debauchery":

> If I had not seen that I was making a hog of myself very fast, and that pig-wash, even if [I] could have got plenty of it, was a poor sort of thing, I should never have

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[9](cont'd) desired alternative to self-interested behaviour: "But by our *best self* we are united, impersonal, at harmony.... Well, and this is the very self which culture, or the study of perfection, seeks to develop in us; at the expense of our old untransformed self, taking pleasure only in doing what it likes or is used to do, and exposing us to the risk of clashing with everyone else who is doing the same!.... We find no basis for a firm State-power in our ordinary selves; culture suggests one to us in our *best self*" (Arnold 78).

> looked life fairly in the face to see what was to be done with it. I laughed out loud at last to think of a poor devil like me, in a Scotch garret, with my stockings out at heel and a shilling or two to be dissipated upon, with a smell of raw haggis mounting from below, and old women breathing as they passed me on the stairs—wanting to turn my life into easy pleasure. Then I began to see what else it could be turned into.... (*FH* 142-143)

But Felix's language—at once preachy and defiantly candid—is unqualified by the narrator's usual careful evaluation. Indeed, from the novel's standpoint there is little need for authorial evaluation. As the embodiment of Eliot's moral radicalism, Felix Holt is free of self-doubts and the illusory desires they give rise to, and he understands himself and the world around him perfectly well. His understanding and ideas are almost always Eliot's. The idealization of Felix Holt eventually contaminates his courtship of Esther Lyon, and gives rise to the sentimental passages which are so embarrassing to read:

> 'What you have chosen to do [said Esther] has only convinced me that your love would be better worth having'....
>
> Felix as quick as lightning turned his look upon her again, and, leaning forward, took her sweet hand and held it to his lips some moments before he let it fall again and raised his head.
>
> 'We shall always be the better for thinking of each other,' he said, leaning his elbow on the back of the sofa, and supporting his head as he looked at her with calm sadness.
>
> 'This thing can never come to me twice over. It is my knighthood. That was always a business of great cost.' (*FH* 418-19)

Impersonality is clearly not a distinguishing feature in either the above passage or the other scenes of courtship. This scene's burden of clichés—the lover who "quick as lightning" presses his beloved's "sweet" hand to his lips and says something noble about renunciation—attests to Eliot's loss of novelistic clear-sightedness. Esther Lyon clearly *is* a heroine with whom Eliot is tempted to identify, and Felix Holt, like Stephen Guest, is an idealized, irresistible lover who reflects—but does not reveal—mediators who are as dangerous in their way as Esther's Byronic gentlemen.

It is perhaps obvious to say that the choices characters make in *Felix Holt* matter because they affect the lives of other characters and the health of the social organism. But choice is problematic because of the interference of imitative desire. In so far as *Felix Holt* sets out to make a point about the imitation of aristocratic models in a society whose social order is

threatened with disruption, Eliot's novel might be considered narrowly political. However, the novel offers one masterfully realized story which is concerned with aristocratic imitation and the complex social forces in the England of the 1830s. Mrs. Transome's fatal submission to her girlhood models leads her to an existence in which choice is no longer possible and happiness is determined entirely by the whims of her son and Matthew Jermyn. In the less successful though intricately related plot, Esther Lyon, whose inauspicious imitation of aristocratic models at the beginning of the novel makes her another potential Mrs. Transome, is educated by Felix Holt. When free choice becomes possible, she renounces the lesser ideal for the greater. What she chooses—besides marriage to the young worker—amounts to a rudimentary form of culture: adherence to individual and class duties in the community of her upbringing.

IV. "Widening the skirts of light": *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*

Middlemarch, the second of Eliot's novels set in the years of the first Reform Bill, appeared in serial form beginning in 1871, five years after the publication of *Felix Holt*. Like its predecessor, it is concerned with the ways in which the health of the community depends on the choices of the individuals who live in it. But here, as the subtitle of the novel suggests, Eliot is less concerned with the exclusively political questions which preoccupied her in *Felix Holt* than with a more general examination of the complexities of provincial life. Nevertheless, like *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* is set in a society in which the absence of commonly held standards which protect the health of the community makes it easier to pursue one's own interests than to act for the common good. At the heart of Eliot's novel, then, is the problem of egoism, our tendency to see ourselves as the centre of all existence and to burden our fellows with our selfish demands. Here egoism contaminates both public and private life in more subtle and complex ways than in *Felix Holt*, creating the need for a broader and more detailed definition of culture. In *Middlemarch* Eliot elaborates on the idea of the culture as the means of transcending egoism, liberating it from the limited political context in which it was given shape in *Felix Holt* and applying it to a wider range of problems.

In his essay on *Middlemarch*, Quentin Anderson argues that although the novel is set at a turning-point in English history—the three years leading up to the first Reform Bill—Eliot's "general intention...is the attempt to render in a novel her sense of the primitive tissue of a community" (Anderson 276). The few references which Eliot makes to the death of George IV and the dissolution of Parliament, or to Middlemarch nomination meetings and the community's new awareness of national political reform, betray little of the sense of political urgency which characterizes *Felix Holt*. Nevertheless, Eliot quickly alerts her reader to certain historic conditions which are problematic. In the "Prelude" Eliot remarks that the noble passions of many "later-born St. Theresas" (like Dorothea) have been thwarted by the absence of a "coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (*M* 25). The key-note is again taken up in the "Epilogue":

> [T]here is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their deeds took shape is forever gone. (*M* 896)

The words recall Eliot's insistence in *Felix Holt* that "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (*FH* 129). Moreover, Eliot is still drawing attention to the absence of, and consequent need for, a reliable set of commonly held standards which permit individuals to live the best life within their community. If the social climate lacks the coherent social standards which are necessary for nurturing the modern St. Theresa in Dorothea or the latter-day Vesalius in Lydgate, it is clear that defining such standards is something which will again pre-occupy Eliot.

The lasting interest of Eliot's art, however, does not lie in the most general expression of the problem at hand. Such an art, Eliot wrote years before, would require of the reader "a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity" (*Essays* 270). The greatness of *Middlemarch* is achieved through her deft and sympathetic portrayal of the characters she uses to illuminate the nature and effects of what she calls "egoism." By "egoism"—and the equivalent expressions "moral stupidity" and "commonness"—Eliot means the tendency of men and women to see themselves as the center of their world and, while liberally ministering to their own whims, to be blind to the needs and desires of their fellows. Through her portrayal of Casaubon and Bulstrode, both of whom are as deftly and as subtly delineated as Mrs. Transome, Eliot reveals the ever-increasing isolation and the eventual living purgatory which egoism imposes on its victims; through her portrayal of Lydgate and Dorothea (and such minor characters as Farebrother, Caleb Garth, and Mrs. Bulstrode), who all emerge from their egoism enough to see that others possess "an equivalent centre of self" (*M* 243), she shows the necessity of cultivating what Felix Holt calls the "best self," that aspect of character which allows one to serve some greater good than one's own interests. On close examination, one finds that the germ of egoism is what Girard calls imitative desire: the tendency, rooted in our self-doubts, to surrender our power of judgment to others and to allow our ideas about the

world and ourselves to be determined by them. But whereas in *Felix Holt* most characters imitate a single aristocratic model, in *Middlemarch* imitation and, therefore, egoism wear more disguises, and different characters are affected by different mediators.

The character who is most confined to an egoistic Hell is Mr. Casaubon. What Casaubon strives to be is, obviously enough, the *ideal* scholar. The (by now) unconscious and involuntary nature of his imitation is reflected in the stiff scholarly demeanour and "frigid rhetoric" (*M* 73) to which he adheres even at the least appropriate times. The inappropriate language of Casaubon's marriage proposal reveals his preoccupation with his scholarly project and the pride which will soon erect barriers to candour and affection between him and his young wife:

> I am not, I trust, mistaken in the recognition of some deeper correspondence than that of date in the fact that a consciousness of need in my own life had arisen contemporaneously with the possibility of my becoming acquainted with you. For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need (connected, I may say, with such activity of the affections as even the preoccupations of a work too special to be abdicated could not uninterruptedly dissimulate).... [B]ut for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of a life's plan), I should presumably have gone only to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union. (*M* 66)

Once the narrator's attention shifts from Casaubon's public self (and from the uncharitable observations of some of his detractors) to his inner consciousness, one notices that Casaubon is burdened with feelings of insufficiency. All his intellectual endeavours are attempts to convince his academic critics and himself of his greatness. In Casaubon's secret consciousness, the contribution he might make to the understanding of primitive religion is secondary to the reputation which he hopes his rival scholars will someday be forced to recognize. Here Eliot reveals Casaubon's secret misgivings about himself and his work, and the dictatorship of opinion to which he is subject:

> [T]he difficulty of making his Key to all Mythologies unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind; and the pamphlets—or 'Parerga' as he called them—by which he tested his public and deposited small monumental records of his march, were far from having been seen in all their significance. He suspected the Archdeacon of not having read them; he was in painful doubt as to what was really thought of them by the leading minds of Brasenose, and bitterly convinced that his old acquaintance Carp

> had been the writer of that depreciatory recension which was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr Casaubon's desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory. These were heavy impressions to struggle against, and brought that melancholy embitterment which is the consequence of all excessive claim: even his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship, and the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten Key to all Mythologies. (*M* 313-14)

Evidently, Casaubon's unwritten "Key to all Mythologies" serves his own narrow interests and not, as Dorothea at first thinks, "the highest purposes of truth" (*M* 40). It is not in the work itself but in the anticipated triumph over his rival scholars that the little happiness left in Casaubon's life resides. The importance which he places on making his work "unimpeachable," the need to "test" his readers, and his vague—perhaps unfounded—suspicions about what other academics think of his pamphlets all attest to Casaubon's inability to see his own worth except through the opinions of others. In fact, Eliot reveals that Casaubon's "Key to all Mythologies" is nothing less than a project of self-apotheosis upon which even his religious faith depends. Like Mrs. Transome, he has exchanged Christian grace for the uncertain approval of others. What Casaubon most desires is not the comparatively modest discovery of the principles which account for primitive religion, but those most unattainable objects, an "unimpeachable" reputation and an "immortality" to be conferred by his harshest critics: Carp and the scholars at Brasenose have become the gods through whom immortality must be sought.

The result of Casaubon's endeavour is isolation from the fellowship of others. The years of research and the publication of "Parerga" do little to quell Casaubon's self-doubts or guarantee the immortality of his work. Over the years Casaubon's egoism has worked itself into a proud rejection of both the pity of others and sympathy for others: "His experience was of the pitiable kind which shrinks from pity, and fears most of all that it should be known: it was that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity" (*M* 313). Even the Casaubon of the first chapters has few feelings of fellowship for anyone. As in the case of Mrs. Transome, Eliot's constant application of the imagery of the underworld to Casaubon is a clue to the pedant's alienation from common

human affections. Casaubon's narrow, subterranean studies preclude any interest in Dorothea's plans to build cottages, or in any other philanthropic activity. His pedantry invests his existence with a deathly quality which is perceived by almost all who meet him. To Celia, the news of Dorothea's and Casaubon's engagement suggests a "funereal" affair where Casaubon is the "officiating clergyman" (*M* 72-73), and Sir James disgustedly remarks, "He is no better than a mummy" (*M* 81). Even Casaubon unwittingly takes part in the criticism when he tells Mr. Brooke, "I feed too much on the inward sources; I live too much with the dead" (*M* 40). Such references serve at first as hints and later as reminders of Casaubon's self-imposed exile from the fellowship of those around him.

Shortly after Casaubon marries he begins to have the terrifying awareness that Carp and the once-distant accusers at Brasenose have found a proxy in Dorothea. By marrying, Casaubon has tried to prop up his failing self-esteem and silence the imagined voices of his critics:

> [I]n relation to his authorship he leaned on [Dorothea's] young trust and veneration, he liked to draw forth her fresh interest in listening, as a means of encouragement to himself: in talking to her he presented all his performance and intention with the reflected confidence of the pedagogue, and rid himself for the time of that chilling ideal audience which crowded his laborious uncreative hours with the vaporous pressure of Tartarean shades. (*M* 112)

But the illusion cannot last long. When, in a despairing attempt at making herself more useful to her husband, Dorothea asks Casaubon if he will soon start writing his work, he sees the "chilling ideal audience" suddenly become incarnate:

> We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions—how much more by hearing in hard distinct syllables from the lips of a near observer, those confused murmurs which we try to call morbid, and strive against as if they were the oncoming of numbness! And this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife—nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference.... He had formerly observed with approbation her capacity for worshipping the right object; he now foresaw with sudden terror that this capacity might be replaced by presumption, this worship by the most exasperating of all criticism,—that which sees vaguely a great many fine ends and has not the least notion of what it costs to reach them. (*M* 232-33)

Soon Casaubon also begins to suspect that Ladislaw is becoming a serious threat to his work

and marriage. Though he has long disliked his cousin and suspected him of taking the "Key to all Mythologies" lightly, Casaubon has maintained a sense of superiority in the knowledge that Ladislaw is financially dependent upon him. But once Ladislaw rejects Casaubon's money and gains Dorothea's friendship and admiration, he seems to join the chorus of independent (and quite possibly superior) critics whom Casaubon resents. The thought of Ladislaw's secret criticism now becomes even more galling to Casaubon:

> He had disliked Will while he helped him, but he had begun to dislike him still more now that Will had declined his help. That is the way with us when we have any uneasy jealousy in our disposition: if our talents are chiefly of the burrowing kind, our honey-sipping cousin (whom we have grave reasons for objecting to) is likely to have a secret contempt for us, and any one who admires him passes an oblique criticism on ourselves. Having scruples of rectitude in our souls, we are above the meanness of injuring him—rather we meet all his claims on us by active benefits; and the drawing of cheques for him, being a superiority which he must recognize, gives our bitterness a milder infusion. Now Mr Casaubon had been deprived of that superiority (as anything more than a remembrance) in a sudden, capricious manner. (*M* 395).

To Casaubon's suspicious imagination it soon seems that Ladislaw is deliberately attempting to turn Dorothea against him: the presence of his young cousin at Tipton, the occasional meetings between him and Dorothea, and Dorothea's innocent request that the will be changed all suggest a conspiracy. For Casaubon, public and private life alike have at last become contaminated by the harsh opinions of others. He spends the last months of his life in complete isolation from his fellow men, distrusting literally everyone:

> Poor Mr Casaubon was distrustful of everybody's feeling towards him, especially as a husband. To let any one suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages: to let them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their (probably) earlier disapproval. It would be as bad as letting Carp, and Brasenose generally, know how backward he was in organizing the matter for his 'Key to all Mythologies.' All through his life Mr Casaubon had been trying not to admit even to himself the inward sores of self-doubt and jealousy. (*M* 412)

In the hands of a lesser novelist Casaubon would be ridiculous or, at worst, despicable. But the particular quality of Eliot's work is that it is capable of extending our sympathies to characters as unsympathetic as Casaubon. The narrator frequently reminds us of Casaubon's essential humanity and takes pains to compensate for the inadequacies of perception which always occur when one listens too long to the opinions of a man's enemies. "In spite of the

blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia," Eliot writes, "and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness in him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us" (*M* 312). A sympathetic understanding of Casaubon is achieved not just through such simple reminders, but through the balanced quality of the narrator's psychological analysis and through the complexities of her irony:

> Suppose we turn from the outward estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to its final pause. Doubtless [Casaubon's] lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason that we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him, since we refer him to the Divine regard with perfect confidence; nay, it is even held sublime for our neighbour to expect the utmost there, however little he may have got from us. Mr Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a *Key to all Mythologies*, this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity. (*M* 110-11)

In order to persuade us that Casaubon "claims some of our pity" Eliot again reminds us that his particular kind of egoism "is not quite alien to us." But the success of the above passage rests largely on the way in which the reminder of our own fallibility is combined with Eliot's irony. One usually thinks of the irony which a narrator has at his disposal as a weapon by means of which the author effects an intimacy with the reader at the expense of the character against whom the irony is directed. Simple irony, then, can pose a problem for novelistic revelation because it encourages (to use Girard's term) a *romantic* reading by which the reader and author alike affirm their superiority at the expense of a character who is dehumanized by the irony: the complex novelistic world is reduced to romantic manicheanism. But in the passage cited above, Eliot's gentle irony is much more complex and better serves the end of novelistic revelation. The irony of "it is even held sublime for our neighbour to expect the utmost [from the "Divine regard"], however little he may have got from us" is gently but specifically directed against the reader rather than against Casaubon, and it puts the reader in what might be called a 'community of egoists' which is also inhabited by the narrator and Casaubon. This 'inclusiveness' does not detract from the validity of Eliot's judgment, but it

helps extend our sympathies to Casaubon and prevents us from feeling any sense of complacency. Whether the irony is directed against the reader or against Casaubon, Eliot frequently reminds us that, as far as our egoism goes, we are more like the scholar than unlike him.[10]

Eliot's delineation of the banker, Nicholas Bulstrode, is similarly effective, and for similar reasons. Though Bulstrode is far from universally liked by the citizens of Middlemarch, he is clearly a man who relishes public recognition, and through his considerable financial clout he has secured a position of immense influence:

> His private minor loans were numerous, but he would inquire strictly into the circumstances both before and after. In this way a man gathers a domain in his neighbours' hope and fear as well as gratitude; and power, when once it has got into that subtle region, propagates itself, spreading out of all proportion to its external means. It was a principle with Mr Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible, that

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[10]Girard approaches the problem of the reader's reaction from a slightly different angle—from the point of view of the reader's responsibilities. In his discussion of Proust's treatment of snobbery Girard remarks,

> We must overcome the irritation which snobbism causes in us. We cannot reach the standpoint of novelistic unity until we have traveled the road taken by the novelists. After condemning Others the Oedipus-novelist finds that he himself is guilty. Thus he arrives at a position of justice beyond pessimistic psychology and romantic idolatry.... And it is this which permits a synthesis of introspection and observation from which spring existence and truth. This synthesis, by destroying the barriers between the Self and the Other, creates the Don Quixotes and the Charlus. (Girard 76)

My point is that Eliot takes effective measures to quell the voices of romantic indignation and help her reader "travel the road taken by the novelist."

The complex relationship between irony, analysis, and the direct challenge to the reader is by no means confined to Eliot's treatment of Casaubon, or even to *Middlemarch*. Eliot treats the characters in the Transome plot of *Felix Holt* in a similar way. Here, for instance, the irony is directed against the lawyer, Matthew Jermyn, but the parenthetical remark in the second sentence demands that, while our sympathies must not be withdrawn, we must feel a little of the bite of the narrator's irony. We are, Eliot tells us, just as prone to clumsy self-justification as Jermyn:

> So many things were more distinctly visible to [Jermyn], and touched him more acutely than the effect of his acts or words on Mrs Transome's feelings! In fact—he asked, *with a touch of something that makes us all akin*—was it not preposterous, this excess of feeling on points which he himself did not feel powerfully moving? She had treated him most unreasonably. It would have been right for her to do what he had—not asked, but only hinted at in a mild interrogatory manner. (*FH* 520-21) [Italics added]

> he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives, and make clear to himself what God's glory required. (*M* 184-85)

As the last sentence of the above passage suggests, Bulstrode is also a hypocrite, albeit a hypocrite who is ignorant of his hypocrisy. In fact, the banker's strict doctrine and worldly ambition seem to co-exist without too much "spiritual conflict" or "inward argument" until, mid-way through the novel, Raffles returns, threatening to make a public announcement of the banker's scandalous past. Now, threatened with public humiliation, Bulstrode becomes an intensely interesting study in egoism:

> In his closest meditations the life-long habit of Mr Bulstrode's mind clad his most egoistic terrors in doctrinal reference to superhuman ends.... And now within all the automatic succession of theoretic phrases—distinct and inmost as the shiver and the ache of oncoming fever when we are discussing abstract pain—was the forecast of disgrace in the presence of neighbours and of his own wife. For the pain, as well as the public estimate of disgrace, depends on the amount of previous profession. To men who only aim at escaping felony, nothing short of the prisoner's dock is disgrace. But Mr Bulstrode had aimed at being an eminent Christian. (*M* 570)

Until now, Bulstrode's egoism has been evident enough in the self-interested providential interpretations he places on almost all events and in his pharisaical lack of sympathy for his fellow men. But the narrator's sudden emphasis on Bulstrode's concern about public opinion—especially his desire to be an *eminent* Christian—provides an important clue to the nature of the banker's egoism. Bulstrode's Christianity is less the imitation of Christ than the imitation of what Bulstrode imagines to be an ideally venerable Christian leader. The distinction to be made between the two kinds of religion is in the kind of the recognition which is sought: like Casaubon, Bulstrode allows the good opinion of others to supply the place of God's grace. His opinion of himself depends on his belief in his public pre-eminence, not on his awareness of his own sin. Under the threat of public humiliation, the "eminent Christian" becomes an increasingly interesting subject for Eliot's scrutiny, and the weight of Bulstrode's concerns shifts perceptibly from his Christianity to his eminence.

Late in the novel, Eliot tells how Bulstrode, who as a young man had "both conviction of sin and sense of pardon" (*M* 663), was seduced by the prospect of attaining pre-eminence through ill-gotten money, and how his struggle to reconcile his religious principles with the

worldly demands of his egoism eventually isolated him from his fellows. Generalizing from Bulstrode's case, Eliot remarks, "There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men" (*M* 668). The destructive potential of Bulstrode's loss of "direct fellow-feeling" and of his terror of public humiliation becomes obvious when the banker is left to tend Raffles. Here Eliot guides her reader along the tortuous path of sophistry which Bulstrode follows when, to save his reputation, he tries to make a deal with God:

> Whatever prayers he might lift up, whatever statements he might inwardly make of this man's wretched spiritual condition, and the duty he himself was under to submit to the punishment divinely appointed for him rather than to wish evil to another—through all his effort to condense words into a solid mental state, there pierced and spread with irresistible vividness the images of events he desired. And in the train of those images came their apology. He could not but see the death of Raffles, and see in it his own deliverance. What was the removal of this wretched creature? He was impenitent—but were not public criminals impenitent?—yet the law decided on their fate. Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue—if he kept his hands from hastening it—if he scrupulously did what was prescribed. (*M* 757)

> Raffles, recovering quickly, returning to the free use of his odious powers—how could Bulstrode wish for that? Raffles dead was the image that brought release, and indirectly he prayed for that way of release, beseeching that, if it were possible, the rest of his days here below might be freed from the threat of an ignominy which would break him utterly as an instrument of God's service. (*M* 761)

Without the restraining power of sympathic feeling, Bulstrode's reason proves too serviceable to his egoism, and so he lets Raffles die. But the sense of release which he feels at Raffles' death is short-lived. The chance meeting between Bambridge and Raffles, not long before the latter's death, generates a wave of gossip which eventually results in Bulstrode's expulsion from the municipal board meeting and the ostracism of the Bulstrodes and the Lydgates.

Leavis has argued that, despite early suggestions of satire in the narrator's irony, "we are not allowed to forget that [Bulstrode] is a highly developed member of the species to which we ourselves belong" (Leavis 86). Once again, in the treatment of Bulstrode, the reader is included in Eliot's criticism. Here Eliot discusses the providential interpretation which Bulstrode applies to his acquisition of Stone Court:

> We are concerned with looking at Joshua Rigg's sale of his land from Mr Bulstrode's point of view, and he interpreted it as a cheering dispensation conveying perhaps a

> sanction to a purpose which he had for some time entertained without external encouragement; he interpreted it thus, but not too confidently, offering up his thanksgiving in guarded phraseology. His doubts did not arise from the possible relations of the event to Joshua Rigg's destiny, which belonged to the unmapped regions not taken under the providential government, except perhaps in an imperfect colonial way; but they arose from reflecting that this dispensation too might be a chastisement for himself, as Mr Farebrother's induction to the living clearly was.
>
> This was not what Mr Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him: it was what he said to himself—it was as genuinely his mode of explaining events as any theory of yours may be, if you happen to disagree with him. For the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief. (*M* 564-65)

Bulstrode's wrong-headed—even procrustean—interpretation of events and his inabililty to consider them from another's point of view are held against him. Yet once again the readers who "happen to disagree with him" cannot be too harsh, for they are included in the criticism. Once again one notices the sympathetic quality of Eliot's analysis which ensures that "we feel [Bulstrode's] agonized twists and turns too much from within...not to regard him with more compassion than contempt" (Leavis 86):

> The quick vision that his life was after all a failure, that he was a dishonoured man, and must quail before the glance of those towards whom he had habitually been a reprover—that God had disowned him before men and left him unscreened to the triumphant scorn of those who were glad to have their hatred justified—the sense of utter futility in that equivocation which now turned venomously upon him with the full-grown fang of a discoved lie:—all this rushed through him like the agony of terror which fails to kill, and leaves the ears still open to the returning wave of execration. (*M* 781)

The masterly quality of Eliot's art is such that, as little endearing as Bulstrode is, the reader's sympathies are genuinely excited by his suffering.

Bulstrode and Casaubon are studies in the isolation which egoism imposes on its victims; Lydgate and Dorothea, on the contrary, are studies in greatness condemned to mediocrity partly through egoism and partly through the absence of a "coherent social faith and order." Through them (and through such minor characters as Farebrother and Caleb Garth) Eliot shows the importance of cultivating the "best self" which is the foundation of culture. Lydgate's potential for greatness lies in his dedication to medical reform. Hoping to avoid the rivalries and intrigues of the London medical community, Lydgate settles in Middlemarch and begins to pursue his two-fold ambition of introducing medical reforms to his

own practice and conducting anatomical inquiries into the nature of the "primitive tissue." What is special about Lydgate's work is that, while it too betrays an element of imitation (Lydgate reveres his great predecessors, especially Vesalius, as "patron saints" [*M* 496]), it rests on an idea of duty which is distinct from and transcends mere self-interest. The innovations which Lydgate introduces to his own practice—in particular, his decision to do away with the dispensing of drugs—attest to his self-suppressing dedication to medical reform. More importantly, his intellectual passion is nourished by a vital, sympathetic feeling for his fellow men and women:

> [H]e carried to his studies in London, Edinburgh, and Paris, the conviction that the medical profession as it might be was the finest in the world; presenting the most perfect interchange between science and art; offering the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good. Lydgate's nature demanded this combination: he was an emotional creature, with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship which withstood all the abstractions of special study. He cared not only for 'cases,' but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth. (*M* 174)

Lydgate's "flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship" and his willingness to undertake reforms which may prove inconveniences suggest that, at the age of twenty-seven, Lydgate has emerged far enough from his egoism to look forward to a career in the service of the common good.

But despite the promise of Lydgate's dedication and good intentions, Middlemarch's newest general practitioner is still "at a starting-point which makes a man's career a fine subject for betting" (*M* 178). The threat to Lydgate's ambition lies in what Eliot calls his "spots of commonness" (*M* 179) and, later, his "unreflecting egoism" (*M* 383): "that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons" (*M* 179). Lydgate's pride in his pedigree and his belief that "there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best" (*M* 180) suggest that his egoism is very close to the imitation of aristocratic models which is so common in *Felix Holt*. The form that Lydgate's imitation takes is unthinking conformity to the fashions distinctive of rank. His superior bearing—or, in his vocabulary, his aversion to "social truckling" (*M* 174)—and his thoughtless extravagance, two manifestations of his

commonness, may prove inconveniences, but by far the most dangerous aspect of Lydgate's commonness is his attitude toward women. Lydgate, like Casaubon, especially admires women who are an "adornment" (*M* 127) to their husbands. Dorothea, for instance, seems to him "a little too earnest" (*M* 119) because, as Eliot later makes clear, "he held it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man's pre-eminence without too precise a knowledge of what it consisted in" (*M* 301). In fact, Lydgate has already narrowly avoided one disastrous marriage: as a student in Paris, his sympathetic nature responded to the sufferings of Laure, the beautiful but mediocre actress. Lydgate's commonness prevented him from seeing, as the actress' other admirers saw, that Laure was a murderer. Moreover, he soon found that his love for his profession and his love for the actress were entirely separate, and possibly detrimental to each other: he "had two selves within him apparently, and they must learn to accomodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments" (*M* 182). But Laure's confession of murder grants Lydgate a temporary reprieve, and leaves him with the complacent feeling that "he had more reason than ever for trusting his judgment, now that he was so experienced" (*M* 183).

In part it is Lydgate's commonness which allows his promising career to slip into mediocrity. He ignores—more precisely, he does not really hear—Farebrother's warning against conformity or his advice that "a good wife—a good unworldly woman—may really help a man, and keep him more independent" (*M* 205). By marrying a woman whose ideas about rank and its luxuries correspond with his own, Lydgate takes on a burden to match the burden of his own common tastes; by marrying a woman whose exclusive quality as an "adornment" precludes any intellectual passion which might respond to his, Lydgate unwittingly makes sure that his burden will be too much to support. The extravagance of the first months of marriage is, we note, Lydgate's fault; but when he tells his wife of the debts, Rosamond's reply, "What can *I* do, Tertius?", falls "like a mortal chill on Lydgate's roused tenderness" (*M* 640). In fact, even as Lydgate begins to realize his mistake and emerge from his commonness, Rosamond becomes more and more like a parasite which drains him of his intellectual passion:

> To Lydgate it seemed that he had been spending month after month in sacrificing more than half of his best intent and best power to his tenderness for Rosamond;

> bearing her little claims and interruptions without impatience, and above all, bearing without betrayal of bitterness to look through less and less of interfering illusion at the blank unreflecting surface her mind presented to his ardour for the more impersonal ends of his profession and his scientific study, an ardour which he had fancied that the ideal wife must somehow worship as sublime, though not in the least knowing why. (*M* 632)

Add to this the exasperation caused by the various instances of Rosamond's stubbornness— her riding while pregnant, her writing to Sir Godwin Lydgate, her interference in her husband's attempt to give up the house, and her persistent demand that Lydgate take a practice in London—and the disastrous consequences of Lydgate's genteel commonness become clear.

Lydgate's commonness, however, is only partly responsible for his downfall. Early in the novel, Farebrother remarks, with typical good sense, "I suppose one good resolve might keep a man right if everybody else's resolve helped him" (*M* 218). The remark is apt. Unlike Casaubon, who condemns himself, Lydgate is thwarted as much by Middlemarchers as by his own egoism. In her usual way of implicating the reader in her judgments George Eliot offers the following remarks:

> [I]n the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardour in generous and unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other useful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. Nothing in the world more subtle than the process of their gradual change! In the beginning they inhaled it unknowingly; you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities and drew our silly conclusions: or perhaps it came with the vibrations from a woman's glance. (*M* 173-74)

The relevance of the "vibrations of a woman's glance" to Lydgate's thwarted ambition is obvious enough; but as the above passage suggests, Lydgate is also condemned by the gossip and petty jealousies he hoped to escape by settling in Middlemarch. In the first place, Lydgate's medical reputation is changed almost weekly by the unpredictable and sometimes malicious workings of public opinion (described at length in Chapter 45). Even if this were not the case, his early association with Bulstrode and his right-minded but decidedly undiplomatic differences of opinion with such men as Chichely and Plymdale are enough to provide him with

enough enemies to hinder even his best purposes. At the meeting called to appoint a chaplain for the old infirmary, Lydgate is goaded by Wrench into voting against Farebrother. The incident is the first of a series in which "this petty medium of Middlemarch" proves "too strong for him" (*M* 217). In fact, from this point on, Lydgate's reputation becomes more and more tightly bound to Bulstrode's. Late in the novel, when Raffles' scandalous knowledge returns, like a ghost, to Middlemarch, public opinion turns definitively against Lydgate. When the general black-balling begins, Middlemarchers reject the society of the Lydgates, Hawley starts looking for evidence to support the town's "vague conviction of [Lydgate's] indeterminable guilt" (*M* 775), and Lydgate's patients desert him. Under such social pressures the Lydgate of the last chapters all but abandons his ambitions and can only think, "I must do as other men do, and think what will please the world and bring in money" (*M* 825).

Part of what the reader must admire in Lydgate is his ability to overcome his own narrow interests in order to act for the benefit of others, even at the expense of his pride and reputation. His sense of sympathy for his fellows and his belief in the value of his profession enable him to escape complete submission to the models of genteel commonness. His staunch belief in medical reform provides the clear-sightedness which enables him to understand Rosamond's pettiness. Once disillusion sets in, Lydgate's sympathetic nature enables him to accomodate himself—albeit very imperfectly—to the egoistic dictates of Rosamond: where another man would resort to wife-beating Lydgate wrestles with his temper. But Lydgate's "best self" appears most impressively at the municipal board meeting from which Bulstrode is expelled:

> Lydgate, who himself was undergoing a shock as from the terrible practical interpretation of some faint augury, felt, nevertheless that his own movement of resentful hatred was checked by that instinct of the Healer who thinks first of bringing rescue or relief to the sufferer, when he looked at the shrunken misery of Bulstrode's face. (*M* 781)

> Bulstrode, after a moment's hesitation, took his hat from the floor and slowly rose, but he grasped the corner of the chair so totteringly that Lydgate felt sure there was not strength enough in him to walk away without support. What could he do? He could not see a man sink close to him for want of help. He rose and gave his arm to Bulstrode, and in that way led him out of the room; yet this act, which might have been one of gentle duty and pure compassion, was at this moment unspeakably bitter

> to him. It seemed as if he were putting his sign-manual to that association of himself with Bulstrode, of which he now saw the full meaning as it must have presented itself to other minds. (*M* 783)

Actions of this kind are only possible through a triumph over self-interest. Although Lydgate deals the death-blow to his already wounded reputation, his action is his greatest transcendence of self. For Lydgate such action is possible because he has never lost his "flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship," and because he obeys the standards of professional conduct. He is, as the narrator remarks, "morally forced" to assist Bulstrode (*M* 784). It is to Eliot's credit that, as much as she admires Lydgate's professionalism (even after his mishandling of Raffles' death), there is no hint of idealization in her account of his action. Lydgate is no saint, but his submission to the demands of his profession allows his "best self" to triumph.

The "best self" is also expressed through the deeds of various minor characters. Though it would take too long to catalogue the many varied instances of the suppression of self for the sake of a greater good (one need only think of the instances of Caleb Garth's life-long dedication to the ideal of honest labour, or of Mrs. Bulstrode's faithful support of her disgraced husband), two of Farebrother's actions may prove useful examples of the kind of transcendence of self which, in Eliot's work, serves the greater good. The first is Farebrother's decision to release Lydgate from any obligation of supporting his claims on the chaplaincy at the old infirmary. Farebrother, who knows that social expectations weigh heavily on Lydgate, simply brushes off the matter by remarking, "I don't translate my own convenience into other people's duties" (*M* 206). In the second, more important, instance, the vicar intercedes on Fred Vincy's behalf with Mary Garth, even though the action effectively ends his hopes of marrying her. Here Farebrother overcomes his desire to court Mary, and seeks out Fred at the Green Dragon, saving him from a relapse into gambling. Fred's bitter and jealous remark, "But I thought you were friendly to me," sparks the following response:

> 'So I am; that is why we are here. But I have had a strong disposition to be otherwise. I have said to myself, "If there is a likelihood of that youngster doing himself harm, why should you interfere? Aren't you worth as much as he is, and don't your sixteen years over and above his, in which you have gone rather hungry, give you more right to satisfaction than he has? If there's a chance of his going to the dogs, let him— perhaps you could nohow hinder it—and do you take the benefit"....

> 'But I had once meant better than that, and I am come back to my old intention. I had thought that I could hardly *secure myself* in it better, Fred, than by telling you just what had been going on in me. And now, do you understand me? I want you to make the happiness of her life and your own, and if there is any chance that a word of warning from me may turn aside any risk to the contrary—well, I have uttered it.' (*M* 728-29)

Farebrother's unorthodox warning describes his temporary relapse into egoism, but it also serves as a brief account of the growth from egoism to the mature recognition that the common good is often distinct from self-interest. The self-justifying sophistry of a Bulstrode, which is evident throughout the first paragraph, gives way, in the second, to genuine fellow-feeling and a disinterested sense of justice.

Through her portrayal of Dorothea, Eliot chronicles in detail the emergence from egoism into fellow-feeling which is only glimpsed in Farebrother's warning to Fred. But only what relates most directly to Dorothea's first marriage has the convincing quality which one expects from Eliot. More obviously than any other character in *Middlemarch*, the Dorothea of the first chapters is the victim of imitative desire. The fact that she can't see any of Casaubon's imperfections—a short-coming from which she alone suffers—can only be explained in terms of her imitation of a model. Dorothea is "enamoured of intensity and greatness" (*M* 30), but since (unlike Lydgate) she has no specific channel for her energies, except for the drawing of plans for cottages, she imagines what it would be like to be the wife of some great man: "She felt that she could have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on" (*M* 32). Dorothea's imitation of her ideal demands that she see Casaubon as another Milton or Hooker. Even before she meets the scholar, her opinions about him have half formed under the pressure of her "venerating expectation" (*M* 33), and we sense that the most insubstantial evidence will be enough to confirm them. In fact, she is immediately struck by Casaubon's resemblance to Locke (*M* 38); later, he seems like Pascal (*M* 51), a "living Bossuet" (*M* 47), and a "modern Augustine" (*M* 47). The transformation is so marked that Dorothea cannot even see how turgid and passionless Casaubon's marriage proposal really is. She can only think of how he will lead her out of her ignorance, and help her to "arrive at the

core of things" (*M* 88):

> Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter a higher grade of initiation. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world's habits. (*M* 67)

Under the influence of her mediator, Dorothea ignores or rationalizes the experiences which should challenge her perception of Casaubon. The narrator reports that Dorothea "filled up all blanks [in Casaubon's character] with unmanifested perfections," and "account[ed] for seeming discords by her own deafness to higher harmonies" (*M* 100).

After Dorothea and Casaubon marry, Dorothea's illusions buckle under the weight of experience, and her disillusionment marks the beginning of her maturity. During the wedding-trip to Rome, she begins to feel the want of affection, but immediately tries to overcome "what she inwardly called her selfishness" (*M* 231). Nevertheless, the narrator remarks, "She was as yet as blind to [Casaubon's] inward troubles as he to hers; she had not yet learned those inward conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently" (*M* 232). When Will Ladislaw cuttingly remarks that Casaubon's inability to read German is a crippling handicap, Dorothea suddenly realizes that "the labour of her husband's life might be void" (*M* 240). The revelation brings disillusionment, and with disillusionment, a new sense of sympathy:

> Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own.
>
> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference. (*M* 243)

At a similar crisis—the loss of faith in the desired object's ability to satisfy—Mrs. Transome, under the influence of an aristocratic mediator, simply discovers a new object to desire. But the

struggle against selfishness, the desire to cultivate the "best self" can already be seen in Dorothea: she already strives for "the fullest truth, the least partial good" (*M* 235). The recognition of Casaubon's "equivalent centre of self" and her first stirrings of sympathy for his "sad conciousness" mark the dawn of Dorothea's maturity. She begins to realize that the discontent which once seemed her private lot burdens Casaubon as well. The realization involves some adjustment of thought and action. Through much suppression of her self, she struggles to treat her husband with consistent compassion.

When Eliot's attention shifts from Dorothea's and Casaubon's marriage to Dorothea's "soul-hunger" (*M* 51) or her relationship with Will Ladislaw, the familiar pattern of sentimentality emerges once again, attesting to the presence of Eliot's mediators. In the "Prelude," which places a misleading and disproportionate emphasis on the English St. Theresa whose story will be only one part of *Middlemarch*, Eliot describes a character who is entirely free from the narrator's irony. "Here and there is born a Saint Theresa," she writes, "foundress of nothing, whose heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed" (*M* 26). In Eliot's portrayal of a Casaubon, a Bulstrode, or a Lydgate, the "hindrances" are at least partly in the nature of the characters; but in the "Prelude," the portrayal of the latter-day St. Theresa presents all "hindrances" as external, and Eliot's irony is directed entirely against the "meanness of opportunity" (*M* 25) which hinders her. In general, when Eliot discusses Dorothea's "spiritual grandeur" (*M* 25) outside of the ironic light which marriage to Casaubon throws on it, she abandons her usual balance of sympathy and criticism, and allows herself to slip into unqualified admiration for her creation's longings:

> The intensity of her religious disposition, the coercion it exercised over her life, was but one aspect of a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent: and with such a nature, struggling in the bounds of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither, the outcome was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency. The thing which seemed to her best, she wanted to justify by the completest knowledge; and not to live in a pretended admission of rules which were never acted upon. Into this soul-hunger as yet all her youthful passion was poured.... (*M* 51)

As in the "Prelude," our sympathies (if they are borne along with Eliot's) are with Dorothea and against the "social life" which condemns her. Leavis remarks that by this time the reader is "in sight of an unqualified self-identification" (Leavis 91) on Eliot's part. By the second book (to follow the thread of Leavis' argument) the idealization comes out into the open. As seen in the Vatican, Dorothea is invested with a glow of idealization which attests to Eliot's loss of critical clearsightedness: "her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair" (*M* 220). The idealization is reinforced by Ladislaw's evident admiration and by Naumann's excessive praise of Dorothea as "antique form animated by Christian sentiment—a sort of Christian Antigone—sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion" (*M* 221). When Dorothea visits Lydgate after the latter's public ostracism, Eliot's idealizing tendencies have completely transformed her heroine:

> Lydgate turned, remembering where he was, and saw Dorothea's face looking up at him with a sweet trustful gravity. The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. (*M* 819)

Eliot's idealization of Dorothea has repercussions for her portrayal of Ladislaw. Here, as in her portrayal of Dorothea, Eliot finds irony and overt criticism quite unnecessary. Indeed, this is not very surprising, since, as Leavis remarks, "George Eliot's valuation of Will Ladislaw, in short, is Dorothea's, just as Will's of Dorothea is George Eliot's" (Leavis 92). Eliot allows Ladislaw's thoughts about Dorothea to stand with as little authorial evaluation as Dorothea's own thoughts: "She was an angel beguiled," he thinks, "It would be a unique delight to wait and watch for the melodious fragments in which her heart and soul came forth so directly and ingenuously" (*M* 241). The pattern of wish-fulfilment familiar from *The Mill on the Floss* and *Felix Holt* is repeated once again. Dorothea (like Maggie Tulliver and Esther Lyon, after her conversion by Felix) is too representative of the ideal of womanhood with which Eliot is tempted to identify; under the insidious influence of her own ideal, Eliot creates

a Ladislaw who (like Stephen Guest and Felix Holt) is a too-perfect mate for her heroine. George Eliot, through her stand-in, responds to her idealized vision of a perfect match as readily as Rosamond Vincy responds to hers or the (immature) Dorothea responds to hers. Once Dorothea and Ladislaw feel the irresistible attraction for each other, the critical side of the authorial evaluation is completely withdrawn, and the most appalling melodrama results:

> 'We may at least have the comfort of speaking to each other without disguise. Since I must go away—since we must always be divided—you may think of me as one on the brink of the grave.'
>
> While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other—and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. Dorothea darted instantaneously from the window; Will followed her, seizing her hand with a spasmodic movement; and so they stood, with their hands clasped, like two children, looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down. Then they turned their faces towards each other, with the memory of his last words in them, and they did not loose each other's hands. (*M* 868)

The "angels" into which the lovers are transformed in *Felix Holt* may have been replaced by the scarcely more tolerable "children," but the unconvincing appeal to noble renunciation where no renunciation is required is again invoked (this time dressed up in a cliché about being "on the brink of the grave"). Meanwhile, all of nature seems to shudder in sympathy with the young lovers.

It is worth noting that what Will Ladislaw represents, besides a fitting husband for Dorothea, is an idea of culture which is distinguishable from the simple moral imperative formulated in *Felix Holt*.[11] Quentin Anderson argues that Ladislaw alone "speaks authoritatively about the world outside the town's awareness" (Anderson 291). Indeed, Ladislaw is clearly meant as the character through whose agency Dorothea at least partly overcomes her "narrow and promiscuous" education (*M* 30). From the beginning of the novel it is clear that Dorothea possesses an active sense of social justice, a highly developed desire to improve the lives of those around her. She would, we note, learn little from a Felix Holt. What she doesn't have—the point is made in the first chapter—is a well-developed appreciation of the beautiful

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[11]For an explicit reference to Ladislaw's studies in the service of culture see Casaubon's remark in Chapter 9 that "Ladislaw wants to go abroad again, without any special object, save the vague purpose of what he calls culture, preparation for he knows not what" (*M* 106).

or the sensuous. Dorothea's unsuccessful attempt to justify her enjoyment of her mother's emeralds by "merging them in her mystic religious joy" (*M* 36) and resolution to give up horse-back riding are, obviously enough, clumsy attempts to accomodate the sensuous side of her nature to her strict religious conscience. Later, the narrator remarks that "severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring into the midst of [Dorothea's] Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance" (*M* 99). By the time she meets Will Ladislaw in Rome she has sensed the need to discover the relevance of the beautiful to her life:

> At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with Frescoes, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe—like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own. But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one, the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me. It must be my own dulness. I am seeing so much all at once, and not understanding half of it. That always makes one feel stupid. It is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is fine—something like being blind, while people talk of the sky. (*M* 238)

Despite his apparent dilettantism, Ladislaw has the educated sensibilities that Dorothea lacks. He can at least offer a set of aesthetic standards which promote the enjoyment of life. In reply to Dorothea's complaint that art "seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world," Ladislaw remarks,

> The best piety is to enjoy—when you can. You are doing the most then to save the earth's character as an agreeable planet. And enjoyment radiates. It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight—in art or in anything else. Would you turn all the youth of the world into a tragic chorus, wailing and moralizing over misery? (*M* 252)

Here Ladislaw's doctrine of aesthetic enjoyment is given its baldest, most extreme expression; elsewhere, however,—both implicitly in Ladislaw's political involvement and explicitly in Dorothea's recognition that Ladislaw cares for "justice" as well as for "poetry and art" (*M* 586)—Ladislaw's aestheticism is balanced by his sense of social duty. It is, then, Ladislaw's status as (at least in some respects) Eliot's spokesman for culture which suggests his appeal as fitting husband for Dorothea. Like Felix Holt, his ability to speak with authority on his subject makes him an appealing figure to Eliot and (as far as his creator is concerned) an apt means of

giving Dorothea her due.[12]

Eliot's loss of novelistic vision extends, I think, to her treatment of Rosamond. But whereas Eliot's portrayal of Dorothea and Ladislaw suffers from the idealization which is the mark of external mediation, the transformation of Rosamond into a figure of pure, detestable egoism is more characteristic of internal mediation. Leavis remarks that Rosamond is "simple ego": "there is nothing in Rosamond besides her egoism—that which corresponds (as it responded) to Lydgate's 'commonness'" (Leavis 83). Rosamond's egoism, then, is the variety familiar from *Felix Holt*: she is, at least at the beginning of the novel, much like an Esther Lyon who, it must be admitted, lacks Esther Lyon's generosity. Nevertheless, Eliot's treatment of Rosamond at the beginning of the novel is fairly sympathetic, and Rosamond is at least complex enough to be recognizable as one of a group of characters (which includes Esther and Hetty) who are studies in the imitation of aristocratic models:

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[12] It may prove useful to draw a parallel with Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* to distinguish between the idea of culture which is familiar from *Felix Holt* and the kind of culture which Will Ladislaw represents. In the Chapter "Hebraism and Hellenism" Arnold distinguishes between two "great spiritual disciplines" which seek "man's perfection or salvation" (Arnold 108). The first, Hebraism, is "this energy driving at practice, this paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have"; the second, Hellenism, is "the intelligence driving at those ideas which are, after all, the basis of right practice, the ardent sense for all new and changing combinations of them which man's development brings with it, the indomitable impulse to know and adjust them perfectly" (Arnold 107). Hellenism, he goes on to note, is governed by "*spontaneity of consciousness*," Hebraism by "*strictness of conscience*" (Arnold 109). In Arnold's view it is necessary to strike a harmonious balance between Hebraism and Hellenism.

Ladislaw, evidently, expresses something like the "*spontaneity of consciousness*" of Hellenism. His insistence on the necessity of loving not only the good but the beautiful (*M* 427) and his love of what sometimes seems little more than contemplative inaction provide an alternative to the "*strictness of conscience*" of Hebraism. Arnold's description of life under the authority of Hellenism is suggestive of Ladislaw's lived aestheticism (and even of the imagery of light and airiness which Eliot constantly applies to him): "To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy; they are kept full of what we call sweetness and light [beauty and intelligence]" (Arnold 112). Ladislaw, of course, more than any other character in *Middlemarch*, can "see things as they are."

> In Rosamond's romance it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero, or of his serious business in the world: of course, he had a profession and was clever, as well as sufficiently handsome; but the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people, and perhaps at last associate with relatives quite equal to the county people who looked down on Middlemarchers. It was part of Rosamond's cleverness to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank, and when she had seen the Miss Brookes accompanying their uncle at the county assizes, and seated among the aristocracy, she had envied them, notwithstanding their plain dress.
>
> If you think it incredible that to imagine Lydgate as a man of family could cause thrills of satisfaction which had anything to do with the sense that she was in love with him, I will ask you to use your power of comparison a little more effectively, and consider whether red cloth and epaulets have never had an influence of that sort. Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions, bring their provisions to a common table and mess together, feeding out of the common store according to their appetite. (*M* 195-96)

Clearly Rosamond, at the beginning of the novel, has some claims on our sympathy. But after her marriage to Lydgate she becomes, as Leavis claims, "pure egoism," and one of the criteria by which we judge the success of Bulstrode—his convincing presentation as "a highly developed member of the species to which we ourselves belong" (Leavis 86)—does not apply to Rosamond Lydgate. The creation of a very simple character like Bambridge or Raffles is excusable—might even be desirable—so long as it doesn't claim too important a part in the novel. But Rosamond Vincy *is* a major character whose simpleness (like Dorothea's under the idealizing influence of Eliot) attests to the tendency of imitative desire to transform the complex world of the novel into the simple, manichean world of the romance. The reduction of Rosamond's character to a single principle is the reverse image of the reduction of Dorothea's. In fact, if we are to characterize the nature of Eliot's portrayal of Rosamond Lydgate, we should say that the usual balance of sympathy and irony is tipped towards irony. Here, what at first promises to extend our sympathies to Rosamond turns into unremitting irony:

> It is a terrible moment in young lives when the closeness of love's bond has turned to this power of galling. In spite of Rosamond's self-control a tear fell silently and rolled over her lips. She still said nothing; but under that quietude was hidden an intense effect: she was in such entire disgust with her husband that she wished that she had never seen him. Sir Godwin's rudeness towards her and utter want of feeling ranged him with Dover and all other creditors—disagreeable people who only thought of themselves, and did not mind how annoying they were to her. Even her father was unkind, and might have done more for them. In fact there was but one person in

> Rosamond's world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked.
>
> Lydgate pausing and looking at her again began to feel that half-maddening sense of helplessness which comes over passionate people when their passion is met by an innocent-looking silence whose meek victimized air seems to put them in the wrong, and at last infects even the justest indignation with a doubt of its justice. (*M* 716)

Such a withdrawal of sympathy allows us to see Rosamond as essentially different from ourselves. Add to this Eliot's account of Rosamond's various cool, self-assured schemes to circumvent her husband, and it is no surprise that "the reader catches himself, from time to time, wanting to break that graceful neck" (Leavis 84). Moreover, the events at the end of the novel conspire to put Rosamond in her place and exalt Dorothea: Will Ladislaw, Eliot's spokesman, rejects Rosamond with uncharacteristic brutality and marries Dorothea; Lydgate, the other major character whom it can be said Eliot admires, realizes Dorothea's superiority over Rosamond; and Dorothea herself proves to be the only character capable of holding Rosamond's egoism in abeyance. That Eliot's stand-in should be exalted in such a variety of ways over the one major character from whom the narrator's and the reader's sympathies are withdrawn strongly suggests that Rosamond Lydgate has been identified, in Eliot's mind, with the internal mediator. The transformations are, in fact, similar to those one would expect from a story told by Casaubon about himself and Ladislaw.

Although *Middlemarch* is much less concerned than *Felix Holt* with the overtly political aspects of imitative desire, it, too, draws attention to the absence of a coherent social order, an absence which gives free play to imitation and once again makes the formulation of the "best self" necessary. Though social conditions effectively thwart the ambitions of a modern St. Theresa or Vesalius, the ability of a Dorothea or a Lydgate to cultivate the "best self" ensures that "things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been" (*M* 896). Here, as in *Felix Holt*, Eliot shows—through the failures of Casaubon and Bulstrode and through the modest successes of Dorothea and Lydgate—the importance of adhering to standards which serve the common good and liberate one from destructive imitation. In *Middlemarch*, however, Eliot's formulation of the "best self" is much more complete than in *Felix Holt*. Here Eliot reveals the

importance of sympathetic fellow-feeling—of seeing one's fellow men and women not as divine models or malevolent spirits in disguise, but as beings whose "equivalent centre of self" demands one's sympathy. Moreover, she begins, though Ladislaw's aestheticism and Dorothea's clumsy attempts at reconciling the sensuous and the beautiful with her Puritanism to hint that the education of the "best self" is not simply a matter of developing a strict moral conscience; it also entails developing one's appreciation of the beautiful in life. As in ***Felix Holt***, Eliot uncovers much of the mechanism of imitative desire, reveals that our tendency to see the world through the eyes of an admired mediator is at the heart of much of our behaviour, and formulates an alternative to imitative desire which is distinct from the Christian message. But again, as in her previous novels, Eliot's work is marred by considerable romantic elements, suggesting that Eliot is still, in some important respects, blind to the imitative nature of her own desires: the complete withdrawal of sympathy from Rosamond Lydgate and the idealization of Dorothea and Ladislaw create an world of almost Manichean simplicity.

V. Conclusion

The idea of culture which George Eliot formulates in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* is largely a response to the problem of imitative desire under a specific set of historical conditions. The fact that Eliot sets both novels in the years of the first Reform Bill suggests (and certainly must have suggested to Eliot's reading public, engaged as it was in debating the effects of a second extension of the franchise) an acute interest on Eliot's part in the questions raised by the democratization of English society. In both novels, imitative desire proliferates because of flexible social structures and the absence of commonly held standards designed to preserve the social order. The society Eliot depicts in *Felix Holt*, in particular, is characterized by a social structure which permits a large degree of social movement, but is still sufficiently based on a system of social classes to allow the aristocratic classes to possess a great deal of prestige. The imitation of aristocratic models, therefore, becomes an important social phenomenon—a phenomenon which, as the action of the novel makes clear, has tremendous destructive potential. In *Middlemarch*, a novel less concerned than *Felix Holt* with exclusively 'political' questions, the imitation of genteel models is evident in the behaviour of Rosamond and Lydgate; but other, more varied forms of imitation—for instance, Casaubon's imitation of a scholarly ideal and Bulstrode's imitation of the model "eminent Christian"—are as important and as disruptive of human relations and the social order.

The particular historical conditions to which Eliot draws attention—social flexibility, the absence of coherent standards which protect the health of the community, and the consequent proliferation of imitation—create an urgent need for the restraining force of culture. Eliot reveals this need and formulates an ideal of culture through two particular patterns of character development and plot. The first may be described roughly as a movement toward the isolation of the individual and the destruction of the community: some characters, such as Mrs. Transome, Casaubon, and Bulstrode submit so entirely to the dictates of their egoism that they exile themselves from the fellowship of those around them; others, such as Matthew Jermyn and Rosamond Lydgate, make their egoism felt primarily through the harm

they do to others. The various forms egoism takes in these characters can be accounted for by imitative desire: all of Eliot's great egoists imitate models and see the world and themselves entirely through the opinions of those models. In the second pattern of development, some characters emerge from their destructive imitation by submitting to the authority of what I have been describing as culture: to varying degrees Esther Lyon, Lydgate, and Dorothea (to name only the most prominent examples) escape their egoism and find a useful place in their community by adhering to a set of objective standards which serve the common good.

The case which Eliot makes for considering culture as a secular or humanist alternative to imitative desire constitutes a significant challenge to Girard's contentions that modern humanisms all fail to supply man's need for transcendency and that one can therefore choose only between human and divine mediators. Unlike the various egoistic endeavours, the pursuit of culture does not entail any destructive imitation because submission to the authority of the "best self" invariably calls for some renunciation of self-interest for the sake of the common good. In *Felix Holt*, culture takes the form of a fairly simple moral imperative. Here Eliot argues for the importance of preserving social order through adherence to individual and class duties. In *Middlemarch* the case is a little more complex. The predominantly moral nature of the "best self" is retained from *Felix Holt*, but Eliot also begins to formulate, particularly through Will Ladislaw, an aesthetic sensibility which provides a necessary adjunct to a strict moral conscience.

Finally, it must be said that as clear as Eliot's understanding of the nature and consequences of imitative desire usually is, it does not extend to all the characters she creates. Her books are, to use Girard's terminology, *novelistic* works which contain considerable *romantic* elements. In a pattern which is first evident in *The Mill on the Floss* and later repeated in both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, Eliot identifies herself with her heroine and sacrifices her normally sound judgment to her own imitative desire. The result is that Eliot withdraws her critical faculties and idealizes her heroes and heroines. In *Middlemarch* a new element is introduced to Eliot's romantic tendencies, the withdrawal of sympathy from Rosamond Vincy,

a character who seems to be identified in Eliot's mind as a rival. The great disparity between the best and the worst in Eliot's art, which has preoccupied critics from Henry James to F.R. Leavis and Quentin Anderson, can, then, be understood in terms of Eliot's incomplete understanding of the imitative nature of her own desires.

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